

## Jacob Zimmer's Story of Captivity at the Hands of McDonell and Crysler, Based on his Firsthand Account

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### Background

Jacob Zimmer's petition of March 1781 to the NYS Assembly is valuable as an American Revolutionary War firsthand historical account. The narrative tells us about his captivity with the Tories (Loyalists) during the Schoharie Valley Loyalist uprising that culminated with the Battle of the Flockey. The recently uncovered handwritten document, now at the NYS Archives, was originally intended to prove to the legislators that Jacob's brother, William, was with John McDonell's and Adam Crysler's Tories against his will in August 1777 in the upper Schoharie Valley. Jacob sought to protect his brother, a convicted Loyalist, from state confiscation of his farm.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Jacob narrated a statement that provided enough details to convince the Assembly that he was indeed there as a prisoner himself and witness to his brother's situation in the Tory camp.<sup>2</sup> My transcription of Jacob's actual statement, as sworn before Assemblyman Isaac Vrooman, is attached to the original article in the Schoharie County Historical Review as an appendix.

Jacob's story, which follows here, is the likely scenario of his capture and three- or four-days' captivity with the Tories based on the observations he presented in his statement. I have tried not to make Jacob's story a retelling of the Battle of the Flockey. It should be looked at as incorporating Jacob's firsthand perspective into the description and timeline that Jephtha Simms,<sup>3</sup> Gavin Watt,<sup>4</sup> and Jeff O'Connor<sup>5</sup> have documented for events leading up to the engagement at the Flockey. Currently accepted spelling of names has been used to be consistent with other authors.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Stolzenburg. *Choosing a Side During the American Revolution: The Remarkable Story of the Presumed Loyalist, William Zimmer, of Breakabeen*. in Schoharie County Historical Review. Schoharie, NY: Schoharie County Historical Society. Fall 2023. Vol. 87. No. 2. P. 7-23

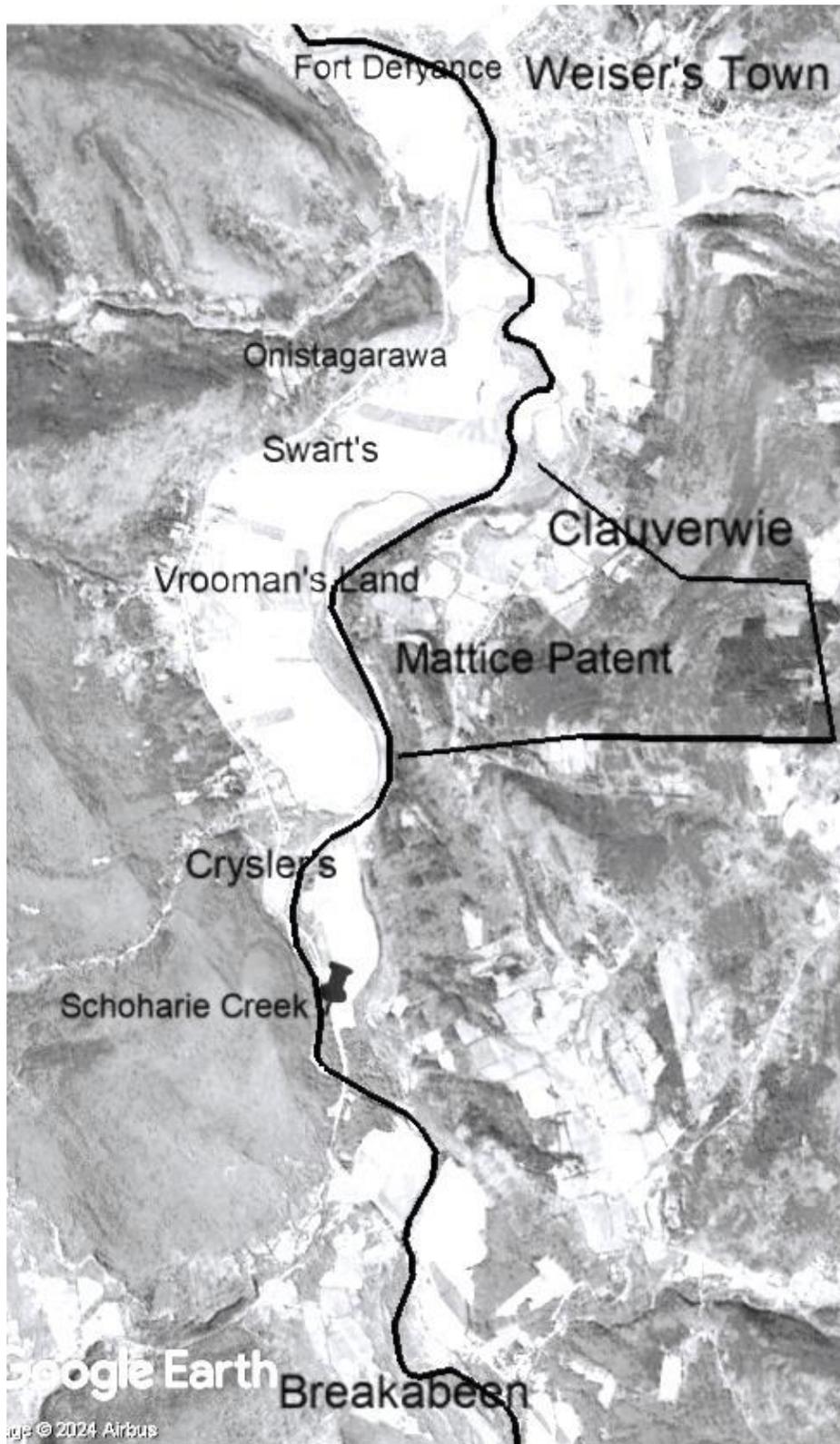
<sup>2</sup>Jacob Zimmer statement/petition. In Mark Stolzenburg. *Jacob Zimmer's Story of Captivity at the Hands of McDonell and Crysler, Based on His Firsthand Account*. Schoharie County Historical Review. Schoharie, NY: Schoharie County Historical Society. 2024. Vol. 88. No. 2. P. 22. Transcription by Mark Stolzenburg from photos of the March 1781 original at *NYS Assembly Petitions, Correspondence, and Reports Relating to Forfeited Estates*. NYS Archives. Collection Series A1816. 1778-1826. Assembly Papers Vol. 25. Box 1. Page 26-30

<sup>3</sup> Jephtha R. Simms. *History of Schoharie County and Border Wars of New York*. Albany, NY: Munsell and Tanner. 1845. P. 237-249

<sup>4</sup> Gavin K. Watt. *The Flockey, 13 August 1777, The Defeat of the Tory Uprising in the Schoharie Valley, 2013 Edition*. Milton, Ontario, Canada: Global Heritage Press. 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Jeff O'Connor. *Thunder in the Valley*. Cobleskill, NY: Schoharie County Historical Society. Times Journal Printers. 2002. The three authors differ slightly in their interpreted timelines.

Map of the Area



## Jacob's Story

Since the written narrative begins with his capture, we do not know the precise circumstances that led to Jacob Zimmer becoming a prisoner of Adam Crysler's and John McDonell's roughly one hundred Tories and several of Crysler's Native American friends. To have been taken prisoner Jacob must have ventured from Weiser's Town, today's Middleburgh, south to the Tory-controlled part of the valley. Why would he do that? Based on facts we do know, there are some probable reasons. First, as a prominent Schoharie Patriot, he most certainly was privy to the latest intelligence coming from the Patriot's gathering spot at Johannes Becker's stone house at Weiser's Town. He would have known of the Tory mischief in the valley at that time, both the actions of George Mann in Fox's Town and Crysler further south. The Committee of Safety needed someone informed and trustworthy to get close, observe, and find out what the Tories camped at Adam Crysler's were up to. Perhaps Jacob stepped up. Probably the same day as Jacob's capture, six Patriots from Becker's met at the "committee hole" to strategize.<sup>6</sup> Jacob may have been informed by or may have been part of that meeting.

Another, more poignant, incentive could have come from family ties; although Jacob's farm was in the Fox Creek Valley, he had five younger siblings and their families living from Weiser's Town south to Breakabeen, in the area known even today as the Clauverwie. He undoubtedly wanted to check on these members of his family whom he knew were subject to the Tory threat.

### Prisoners

With the Loyalist force of McDonell (McDonald) and Crysler (Krieslaer) based at Adam Crysler's farm and mills on the west side of Schoharie Creek about five miles south of Becker's, Jacob's likely route south would have been on the east side of the valley in the Clauverwie. Jacob may have felt he was a safe distance from the enemy camp. He quickly learned otherwise. He was taken prisoner by McDonell's men, probably surprised by one of several small patrols scouring the valley for cattle, Loyalist recruits, and for local Patriotic "friends to the country" to threaten into submission or to take as prisoners.<sup>7</sup>

Jacob Zimmer was a lucky catch. Surely the Tories did not expect to find the prominent Patriot that far from home. He had been elected in May 1775 to Schoharie's first Committee of Safety and was one of two local men sent to Albany in that month to select delegates to the New York Provincial Congress. Jacob's captors brought him across Schoharie Creek to McDonell at Adam Crysler's where he was surely pried with questions about Patriots gathering at Johannes Becker's stone house and their plans. Jacob confirms that the Tory camp was still at Crysler's and that McDonell had arrived there, placing the date of his capture on August 10.

Jacob states that prisoners taken by Tory patrols were obliged, forced even, to bring along any firearms they possessed. Jacob was armed when taken. Presumably the guns were discharged if loaded or otherwise temporarily disabled, and powder and ball confiscated. These extra weapons were so important to McDonell and Crysler that threats from their Indian allies

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<sup>6</sup> Jeff O'Connor. P. 26. As quoted from the record of Judge Peter Swart. His is the only name known of the six. O'Connor placed the date of this meeting on August 10, the likely date of Jacob's capture, as we will see.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Zimmer. 1781. P. 26 Jacob observed parties being sent out from the Tory camp.

were used to enforce this policy. They used the Indians' reputation for mistreatment of captives to their advantage. The prospect of Indians "sat upon" a man or his family was effective intimidation.<sup>8</sup> Since the Loyalist forces needed the guns, but probably had no extensive transport train, prisoners could serve as pack horses by carrying firearms that would be needed later.

On August 11, the day after he was taken, Jacob must have felt both surprised and dismayed when his younger brother, William, was hauled into the Tory camp as a prisoner, carrying his gun.<sup>9</sup> William was presumably taken near his farm at Breakabeen. He was an elected member of the Schoharie Committee of Safety.

From Jacob's statement alone we know of three prisoners by name being held by McDonell and Crysler as of August 11: Jacob Zimmer himself, William Zimmer, and one Lt. Henry. This third man was most likely either John or James Hendry of Harpersfield.<sup>10</sup> Jacob says there were several other prisoners. Other sources name prisoners who Jacob may have seen in the Tory camp: David Hendry,<sup>11</sup> Isaac Patchin, Nathan Daley, and Jonas Vrooman. The 1783 deposition of Isaac Patchin refers to several unnamed prisoners as well.<sup>12</sup>

At least four of those taken by the Tories were or had been committeemen: Patchin, Vrooman, and the two Zimmer brothers. The word in camp was "it would go hard with those who had acted as committee." As high value prisoners, they could expect harsher treatment and a closer guard. The fact that Jacob described that he was "there as committee" suggests that he considered himself sent on a Schoharie Committee mission, since he was not at that time officially a member of the committee.<sup>13</sup>

Hendrick Mattice's

Jacob learned shortly after he was taken that the Tories had business that day with Hendrick Mattice (Matheyse). Although damage to the document prevents a one hundred percent reading of this part of Jacob's statement, the context and pieces that we do have suggest that on August 10, McDonell and Crysler's men were moving their camp from Crysler's mills to Hendrick Mattice's farm.<sup>14</sup> If so, this information is historically significant in that it tells us where the Tories may have camped August 10 and/or 11, which fills an information gap in the primary source materials available before Jacob Zimmer's statement was known to exist. Even

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. P. 26

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Zimmer. 1781. P.27, 28. Jacob says he and his brother were in McDonell's camp together for 48 hours. From his statement, it appears Jacob was there from Aug. 10-13. That would put William there Aug. 11-13 and beyond. Both men "delivered up" their arms, indicating they were armed when taken. I interpret the "marched to Krieslaer's" to mean the Aug. 13 fall back to Adam Crysler's.

<sup>10</sup> Edward A. Hagan. *War in Schohary*. Middleburgh, NY: The Middleburgh News Press. 1980. P. 28. Confirms which Hendry brothers held rank of lieutenant.

<sup>11</sup> David Hendry. *Revolutionary War pension and bounty land warrant application file 3990*. David Hendry, New York. Record group 15. National archives identifier 54852029.  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/54852029>

<sup>12</sup> Isaac Patchin. *The Examination and Deposition of Isaac Patchin of Schoharie, 25 April 1783*. New York State Library. Manuscripts and special collections. Document #4050.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Zimmer. 1781. P. 27

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. P. 26

Cryslers' journal is notably lacking in this detail.<sup>15</sup> Jacob's words do not seem to convey whether Mattice was a cooperative host to the Tory forces. By the time he put his statement/petition to paper in March 1781, Jacob would have presumed Hendrick Mattice to be allied with the Loyalists and may have named him for that reason. Mattice left the valley August 9, 1780 with Joseph Brant after his Vrooman's Land raid. Hendrick was convicted as a Loyalist and his property was confiscated by New York State.<sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup>Some in the Mattice family contend that he left as Brant's prisoner.<sup>18</sup> Jacob undoubtedly knew Mattice's political leanings in 1777 but may have had his reasons for not revealing them in 1781.

Hendrick Mattice's place was probably located on the 1400-acre Mattice Patent, granted to Hendrick's father in 1770 and sitting on the Clauverwie at today's Middleburgh-Fulton town line about three miles south of Weiser's Town.<sup>19</sup> Mattice's, on August 11 and 12, might have provided a base from which to plunder Vrooman's Land, just across the Schoharie Creek. Jacob witnessed parties sent out to take cattle and prisoners.<sup>20</sup> The increased Tory activity in the Clauverwie vicinity could have contributed to Jacob's discovery and capture. The move away from Cryslers' may have been necessary if his farm and mills lacked sufficient provisions with the addition of McDonell's men, arriving late in the day August 9. They apparently came with limited supplies. Crysler mentions that the twenty-eight men were "all in provisions for one day and night."<sup>21</sup> Mattice also had a grist mill in Breakabeen.

Relocating the Tory camp to Hendrick Mattice's would have made sense to McDonell strategically, providing a moving target in case the Patriots attacked and advancing stepwise north, closer to the Patriot stronghold at the Becker house, which was about this time christened "Fort Defyance," (on the site that would become the Middle Fort) where McDonell expected a confrontation to take place. His next move would then be to the already ravaged lower Vrooman's Land to occupy the Peter Swart place.<sup>22</sup> That occurred August 12 and put the Loyalists within striking distance of Fort Defyance, two miles away.

#### Swart's

The Swart family was not sympathetic to the Tories' cause. Peter Swart was a Patriot at Fort Defyance, aside from his quick attempted trip to Albany when he was captured by, then

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<sup>15</sup> Adam Cryslers. *Journal of Adam Cryslers*. in James J. Talman, (ed). *Loyalist Narratives from Upper Canada*. Toronto: The Champlain Society. 1946. P. 98. Dates differ but Cryslers leaves a gap between McDonell's arrival and the night before the Battle of the Flockey. All agree the first camp was at Cryslers', the last at Swart's. The Tories' whereabouts in the two-day interval between them is previously unrecorded.

<sup>16</sup> Jephtha R. Simms. 1845. P. 382.

<sup>17</sup> Frederic G. Mather (ed). *New York in the Revolution as Colony and State Supplement*. Albany, NY: Oliver A. Quayle. 1901. P. 256.

<sup>18</sup> Rex G. Mattice. *Mattice Family History: Palatine emigration*. Provo, UT: J. Grant Stevenson. 1963. P. 733

<sup>19</sup> Rex G. Mattice. 1963. P. 568. Rex Mattice writes that Hendrick Mattice's children were born on the Mattice Grant.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob Zimmer. 1781. P.26

<sup>21</sup> Adam Cryslers journal

<sup>22</sup> John J. Vrooman. *Vrooman's Land*. in Schoharie County Historical Review. Schoharie, NY: Schoharie County Historical Society. May 1950. P.23. Map of early Vrooman's Land shows the Swart parcel's location.

escaped from some of George Mann's Tory men. It is unknown today if there was resistance by Swart's wife, Cornelia, or his family, to the commandeering of the farm in lower Vrooman's Land. The family probably had taken refuge at Fort Defyance by that time.

Jacob's words at this point in his narrative indicate a decided change in attitude among the Tory men and their leaders. In skirmishes before this, the Tory patrols may have exchanged fire with some uncooperative Patriot farmers, but now all knew a larger battle was imminent. Apparently, some of the Loyalists were losing their nerve as each was faced with the all-important decision whether to take up arms for the King to fight against neighbors and abandon family. Jacob states that some men had arms yet refused to fight, and others lacked arms altogether. No longer were prisoners carrying firearms. Those not loyal to the King "delivered up" their guns and were put under guard at Swart's. This included the Zimmer brothers, Lt. Henry, and others.<sup>23</sup> McDonnell and Crysler wanted weapons in the hands of what men they could trust. They were likely counting heads and weighing their offensive and defensive options. Should they risk an attack on the Becker house? The turmoil in the ranks, the shortage of weapons, and waning hope of reinforcement provoked a nagging hesitation and indecision on the part of the Tory leaders.

Meanwhile, among those under guard at Swart's, the Zimmer brothers were conversing about the prospects for their escape. William seems to have been the pessimist of the pair, noting that since they both were associated with the Schoharie Committee of Safety, the chances of them slipping away unnoticed were slim.<sup>24</sup>

A couple miles north at the feebly garrisoned Fort Defyance, Patriots were preparing what defenses they could quickly put together to help fend off the expected Tory attack. No one thought the chances were good against the superior Tory numbers. At the same time, they were hoping against hope that one of the messengers they had sent to Albany to plead for help might muster some reinforcements. Time was running out. No one at Swart's or Fort Defyance rested easy the night of August 12.

#### Escape at the Flockey

The events of the next morning would change everything. One of the pleas of Fort Defyance had been answered in the form of the return to the valley of Col. John Harper from Albany at the head of a troop of the Second Continental Light Dragoons. The mounted troopers were itching to engage the Tories and soon all, Patriot and Tory, knew the cavalry and militia were headed south from Fox's Town. Suddenly, the defensive option was the only one that made sense to McDonnell and Crysler and the flats of Vrooman's Land at Swart's was no place to face a mounted attack. The Tory leaders ordered their men to quickly fall back to Crysler's where the terrain was more defensible. The hurried march and last-minute preparations for battle were a distraction for Tory men charged with guarding prisoners, as was the approach of the dragoons and the brief engagement we now know as the Battle of the Flockey. To add to the confusion, Crysler detached thirty-five men, sending them across the Schoharie to "intercept the rebels at Breakabeen if they should take that route."<sup>25</sup> The mayhem was such that Capt.

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<sup>23</sup> Jacob Zimmer. 1781. P.27

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. P.27

<sup>25</sup> Adam Crysler journal

McDonell lost his baggage and, for Jacob Zimmer and the other prisoners, “an opportunity offered” to make their escape. Several did so, including Jacob.<sup>26</sup>

Before the war was over, Adam Crysler would get his revenge for Jacob’s escape. With a party of Tories and Indians July 26, 1781, Crysler went looking for Zimmer at his farm in the valley of Fox Creek, at today’s Gallupville. Jacob was not there, but his son, also named Jacob, and a Hessian worker were killed and scalped and son, Peter, was taken to Niagara as a prisoner. Family tradition says that Jacob Zimmer was never the same man after his son’s death. His world subsequently all but fell apart.

On McDonell’s route of retreat from the Flockey to Oswego then to Canada, prisoners were set free at Charlotte Creek (then Tryon County, Delaware County today) after they were administered an oath by the Tories. Only three remained with McDonell against their will, one of them was William Zimmer.<sup>27</sup> His earlier pessimism foretold his future; he tried to make a break for it without success.<sup>28</sup> He would spend the rest of the war in Canada with the King’s Royal Regiment of New York, many said not willingly.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusions

What have we learned from Jacob Zimmer’s account of the August 1777 Loyalist occupation of the upper Schoharie Valley? The following points should be added to the history of the Battle of the Flockey:

- Jacob Zimmer, William Zimmer, and Lt. John or Lt. James Hendry were prisoners of McDonell and Crysler in the days before the Battle of the Flockey. Jacob was likely taken August 10 in the Clauverwie, William, August 11 in Breakabeen, and Hendry, August 9 near Harpersfield. The point to be made from Jacob, as well as other sources, is that there were many Patriot prisoners in the Loyalist camp. These were local men who resisted the Tory threats, refusing to join their ranks. Most managed to escape.
- Hendrick Mattice’s farm on the Mattice Patent was the possible location of the Tory camp the night of August 10 and/or 11. It may have been the base for the plundering of Vrooman’s Land August 11 and 12. Jacob did not mention whether he considered Mattice to be cooperating with McDonell, but Mattice was later convicted as a Loyalist.
- McDonell’s and Crysler’s men were short on firearms. Jacob was clear that there were some men without arms. This supports the previously known information from the Isaac Patchin deposition, in which he said the Tories were “armed some with guns and bayonets and others with spears and others with different arms.”<sup>30</sup> Jacob Zimmer offered additional detail about the Tories

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<sup>26</sup> Jacob Zimmer. 1781. P. 27

<sup>27</sup> *NYS Assembly Petitions, Correspondence, and Reports relating to Forfeited Estates*. NYS Archives. Collection Series A1816. 1778-1826. Assembly Papers Vol. 25. Box 1. P. 49. The second petition pleading for relief from forfeiture for William Zimmer, signed by fifteen Schoharie Patriots.

<sup>28</sup> Jacob Zimmer. 1781. P. 27

<sup>29</sup> Mark Stolzenburg. 2023. P.7-23.

<sup>30</sup> *The Examination and Deposition of Isaac Patchin of Schoharie, 25 April 1783*. NYS Library. Manuscripts and Special Collections. Document #4050.

seeking to alleviate the shortage of guns with captured Patriots' weapons, and to enforce this with threats to prisoners from Crysler's Indians.

- The Tory men did not exhibit a homogeneous strong allegiance to the Crown. Jacob made clear some of them lacked the will to fight, armed or not. Several months later, June 13, 1778, a petition by twenty-eight of Capt. McDonell's men to Quebec Governor Guy Carleton also expressed their unwillingness to serve as Loyalist soldiers.<sup>31</sup> Sixteen of them had been with McDonell at the Battle of the Flockey. The thirty-five men detached by Crysler to Breakabeen on August 13, 1777 "were all dispersed," not to be found after the battle.<sup>32</sup> Were they selected from the less enthusiastic Tories?

Does Jacob Zimmer's narrative change the way we look at McDonell and Crysler's short reign over their piece of the Schoharie Valley? If anything, we might say the local level of anti-Tory sentiment and dissent in the Tory ranks has been underestimated until now.

Jacob Zimmer's elucidation of the weapons and morale issues that McDonell faced is crucial to the understanding of the Tory captain's hesitance to attack the Patriots at Johannes Becker's stone house before August 13. With his numerical advantage, it would appear that McDonell missed an opportunity. A strike on Defyance may well have given the Loyalists an early victory and control of more of the Schoharie Valley, but only if his novice company was up to the task. McDonell, out of caution, may have thought the men were not ready and, therefore, the risk too great. After almost 250 years, Jacob Zimmer has now told us why.

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<sup>31</sup> Petition by twenty-eight men of John McDonell's company requesting their transfer to New York. Great Britain, War Office (WO 28) : America : C-10861... - Image 1303 - Héritage (canadiana.ca). The men said they "never inlisted as soldiers nor do not intend to inlist."

<sup>32</sup> Adam Crysler journal