

*The Vought Family,
Loyalists in the
American Revolution*



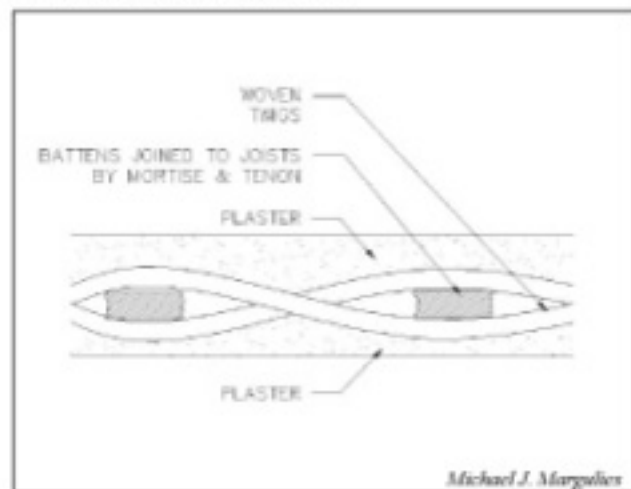
*The Vought House as it appears today
in Hunterdon County, New Jersey.*

Donald E. Sherblom

The Vought family's new house was the prize of fifty years of family farming in the American colonies. Many early German homes had just two first floor rooms, a large 'stove room' (used as a living and dining area and a bedroom) on one side of a central chimney with a smaller kitchen on the other side. In contrast, the Vought House was both larger and more refined; a center hall separates first floor living and entertaining rooms from the private sleeping areas.

The Ceilings

The most important architectural refinement in the Vought house is overhead: This may be the only house in the United States with four mid-18th Century Germanic decorative plaster ceilings. Two similar ceilings were removed from the deteriorating Hehn-Kerchner house in Pennsylvania and reconstructed at the Dupont Winterthur Museum. But we know of no other home with four similar ceilings still in place.

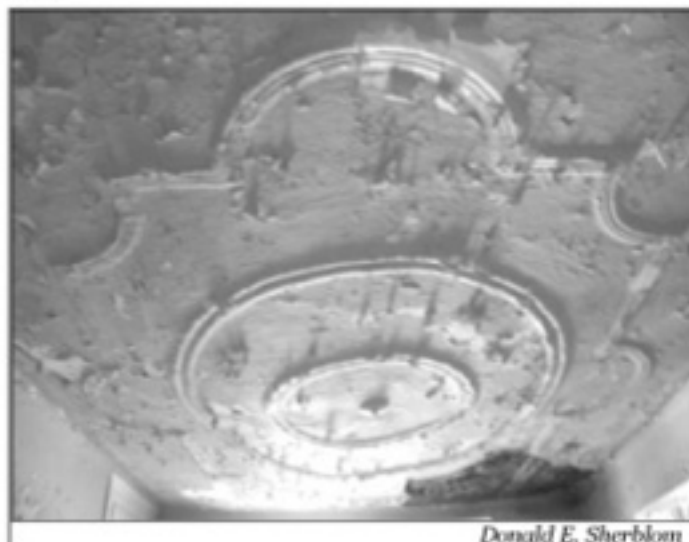


We know these are original ceilings in part because the materials used in this "wattle and daub" construction are consistent with the era and because the house was framed to carry the tremendous load of these thick ceilings. First, battens were run between the floor joists and twigs were carefully woven above

and below these battens to form a net for the mud and plaster. After the hay, mud and plaster was daubed into the wattle of woven branches, the entire ceiling was troweled smooth.



The artisan then created the three geometric designs and the unique snake design we see today, nearly 250 years later! The design was not applied on the plaster but formed directly into the outer layer of plaster, probably using a wooden jig with a guide arm and a molding-shaped edge to carry the desired shape around the ceiling. These ceilings and their geometric designs are impressive examples of craftsmanship in 18th Century rural New Jersey.



Donald E. Sherblom

But why did Christoffel and John Vought choose to fight against independence, to take up arms as Loyalists? Present-day Americans typically explain Loyalists as motivated by material interests and Patriots as motivated by ideals. However, people on each side acted both from personal gain and fundamental belief, and it is often difficult to disentangle which prevailed.



Re-enactors: New Jersey Volunteers
Donald E. Sherblom

Interests

The Vought family had little to gain from a political upheaval, and a lot to lose: the newly enlarged 488 acre plantation, impressive stone house and excellent barns, the crops and livestock they'd worked so hard to attain. Their property and position might be at risk in a new social order.

But material interests were hardly decisive. Far wealthier men favored independence. Most of the Revolutionary leaders were landed gentry such as Washington and Jefferson, who derived their wealth from the enslaved workers on their plantations or the tenants who worked their Manors. New Jersey's Revolutionary Governor was William Livingston, of Livingston Manor.

The Commander of Revolutionary forces in New Jersey, the man preparing to defend New York City, William Alexander, who claimed the title Lord Stirling, was the son of the largest landowner in New York and New Jersey, James Alexander. On the other side, many of the colony's wealthiest men, such as the owners of the Union Iron Works, Philadelphia merchants William Allen and Joseph Turner, remained loyal to Britain.

More importantly, like Patriots, Loyalists came from all levels of the hierarchical social order. Material interests might help explain who favored or opposed democratic equality in post-colonial America, but not allegiance in the War for Independence.

Ideals

During the attack on Jones, the clubman apparently used the term Whig: "Dam by whig kill him out of the way." The Vought family's beliefs and ideals probably inclined them toward the Tory cause and against local Whigs.

Conflict between Whigs and Tories had defined British politics since the 17th Century civil war. Tories supported the monarch's divine right to rule and the Anglican Church as an established church, one supported by taxes and in turn supportive of the existing political order. Whigs also revered the King but insisted on religious freedom. And in contrast to a divine right to rule, Whigs thought governments legitimate only when they protected the inherent or "natural" rights of citizens. This concept of individual rights pre-existing government became the cornerstone of American political culture.

Whigs were often members of dissenting churches, those largely governed by congregations, such as Dutch Reformed, Baptists, and especially Presbyterians, and were opposed to establishing an official religion. Calls for an Anglican bishop in America were considered a threat to religious and political liberty. Presbyterians were so staunch in their support some saw them as the driving force of the Revolution, a simplification not completely off the mark. (Cody 1975:12)

Many Whigs in Britain were sympathetic to American efforts to protect their liberty, even if they did not support outright rebellion. Lord Admiral Howe was a political Whig who accepted this command on condition that he was also commissioned to negotiate peace.

American Patriots, who like Thomas Jones and land rioter Abraham Clark came to believe only independence could preserve their rights as Englishmen in America, were considered Whigs. As the conflict escalated, people on each side made decisions,

As the beleaguered Patriot army retreated across New Jersey, Washington's leadership was being challenged by General Lee, who tarried despite Washington's urgent pleas to move his troops to join Washington's. In the middle of December, General Lee was captured in Basking Ridge, when he and a dozen of his guard stayed overnight at a Tavern a few miles from his army.

As winter approached, Washington's defeated army was melting away, with men deserting and leaving as their enlistments ended. Thomas Paine was with the disintegrating army in retreat across the Jerseys, and wrote of this desperate time in the American Crisis:

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. . .

All that Howe has been doing for this month past, is rather a ravage than a conquest, which the spirit of the Jerseys, a year ago, would have quickly repulsed, and which time and a little resolution will soon recover.

I shall not now attempt to give all the particulars of our retreat to the Delaware; suffice it for the present to say, that both officers and men, though greatly harassed and fatigued, frequently without rest, covering, or provision, the inevitable consequences of a long retreat, bore it with a manly and martial spirit. All their wishes centred in one, which was, that the country would turn out and help them to drive the enemy back.

The War for Independence was now at its lowest ebb. In November, Howe proclaimed protection and a pardon for anyone signing a declaration of allegiance to the crown. Three thousand residents quickly signed for protection papers. On December 9th Patriot forces escaped across the Delaware River in boats collected by Captain Thomas Jones and the Hunterdon militia.

That's when Christoffel and John Vought and Joseph Lee collected the 55 to 85 Loyalists they'd recruited from Hunterdon County to join the British in putting down the rebellion. They set out at night and rode to meet the British at New Brunswick. They were intercepted by the Hunterdon militia at Two Bridges, where the North and South branches of the Raritan River come together, in present-day Branchburg.

A "distinguished Tory named Christopher Vought, or Voke, led on a large body of Refugees and Tories from Lebanon in Hunterdon . . . attempting to make their way to the headquarters of the army then at Brunswick. They were discovered by Dr. Jennings, and he made it known to Capt. Lane, and the Co[mpany] was immediately called out with Capt. Jacob Ten Eyck's Comp'y to intercept them; fell in with them at the 2 Bridges, junction of the N. and S. branches of the Raritan; had a fight with them. Wm. Van Syckle of our Co[mpany] was wounded in the head; they [blank] and ran to a fording place near Cornelius Van Derveer's mill on the N. Branch, where they crossed and made their way toward Brunswick. Ten Eyck's Co[mpany] took one prisoner, who was mounted, and Capt. Ten Eyck took his horse"

[Pension Application, in Gerlach 1975:356]

That their action was so quickly discovered by Patriots shows that although 20,000 British and Hessian troops occupied the Jerseys, those areas not directly under British control remained contested. (Veit, 2008) This Battle of Two Bridges shows that "rebel authorities generally knew what was going on in their neighborhoods, and significantly, that they had effective local military assets to employ against counter-revolution." (Lender 2002:33). The Jerseys were occupied but Patriot partisans remained active and the militia alert and able to confront Loyalists.

While General Washington was over into Pennsylvania before the Battle of Trenton and Princeton there were a great many Tories along the

Christiana's Song

John Vought and Mary Grandin had been married a year when, on September 13, 1773, Mary gave birth to a daughter they named Christiana after John's sister who had died "in child bed" a few months before. Christiana was still only three years old when her father and grandfather rode off to join the British in what looked to be a relatively short war against a disintegrating rebel army in December 1776. After General George Washington's bold Christmas Day Delaware River crossing and decisive victory at Trenton and at Princeton, the prospect of a short war had faded.

Now, in the spring of 1792, the American War was long over. Christiana had spent the last eight of her eighteen years on the barren shores of Nova Scotia. The half dozen years before that she'd lived among the British troops and the New Jersey Volunteers on Staten Island. Christiana had only distant memories from her youngest days spent in the Vought family's large, well-furnished stone house. But she was not entirely cut off from their life in Hunterdon; friends and relatives still lived there.

The thirteen rebellious colonies had finally forged a national constitution. George Washington was serving his first term as the nation's President. John Vought decided to take his family back to these United States, to land outside Albany that Christoffel bought in 1772 as an inheritance for his two children.

When they sailed in 1792 for their New York farmland, John Vought was the patriarch of a traditional household that included his parents, his wife, six children, his nephew and servants. For five weeks, as they sailed down the New England coast and up the Hudson River, Christiana kept a journal. (ver Planck 1907: 21-24) This first person account, excerpted below, provides an intimate glimpse of Christiana's style and sensibility.

From Nova Scotia

On Tuesday Evening, The 8th of May 1792. My father with his family Embarked on board of the Schooner Alice, Comanded by John Osburn.