

ST. EUSTATIUS, CARIBBEAN ANTILLES

AND THE BIRTH OF ISRAEL

By Jerry Klinger



Cornwallis surrenders to George Washington
(Courtesy of the U.S. Navy)

237 years ago, on the Dutch Caribbean Island of St. Eustatius, an oft-repeated Jewish tragedy occurred. February 3, 1781 the Jews were expelled by the British. British calumny, mired in virulent anti-Semitism, culminated years later with the birth of Modern Israel.

St. Eustatius is a very tiny Dutch Island, largely devoid of natural resources but incredibly rich in history that fundamentally affected the survival of America. November 16, 1776, the American brig, Andrew Dorea sailed into the harbor of Oranjestadt, St. Eustatius. She proclaimed her arrival firing thirteen guns, one for each of the 13 American colonies who had united in revolt against Britain. The Andrew Dorea flew the colors of the Continental Government – soon to become the United States of America. Governor Johannes de Graff answered, with 11 guns. Two guns less was international protocol recognizing the flag of a sovereign nation. St. Eustatius became the site of the “First Salute”. Holland had recognized the independent Colonies. The British were enraged.

The Andrew Dorea went to Statia, the name the locals call St. Eustatius, to buy gunpowder. Nobody was willing to sell gunpowder and military supplies to the young American government. The Dutch were. They were “Neutral”. Statia was a free port and many of the merchants were Jews with extensive European and Caribbean connections. Statian merchants, but especially the Jews, aligned themselves with the American cause. The Jews were more than willing to factor arms for the Americans. Statia became the “Armory of the American Revolution.”

The “First Salute” had enraged the British. With the war not going as well as the British hoped in 1781, their blood was boiling because of Statia.

Lord Stormont thundered in Parliament, "if Sint Eustatius had sunk into the sea three years before, the United Kingdom would already have dealt with George Washington".

Britain declared war on Holland Dec. 20, 1780. A battle fleet of 15 ships of the line, under Admiral George Brydges Rodney, was sent to destroy Statia. With over 1,000 cannon and 3,000 Marines, the British arrived Feb. 3, 1781. It was not much of a fight. Ft. Oranje had less than six guns and 45 soldiers. A cannon was fired, for honor's sake, by the Dutch. Statia surrendered.

Below the Ft. walls, for 1 ½ miles along the shoreline, vast amounts of military materials, supplies and, trading goods were found by the British. Everything was confiscated. 130 ships in the harbor were seized. Admiral Rodney surveyed the incredible wealth that had been captured. Under British law, it belonged to the King but a percentage belonged to him. He was suddenly a very rich man and he could become even richer.

Rodney immediately ordered the arrest of the Jews. Rodney had a particular hatred for Jews. The Jewish men were thrown into a prison house and the family leaders were expelled to British St. Kitts. The clothing on their bodies was sliced open looking for money. Jewish graves were ripped open looking for Jewish treasure. A huge amount of money was confiscated. Rodney understood the Jews were alone in the world; no one was going to help them. No one did. He could do with the Jews what he wanted.

Rodney's official orders were to destroy the munitions at Statia. He was to continue shadowing the French fleet. When Rodney realized he could steal and rob with impunity, he violated his orders. Rodney remained on Statia lining the King's and his pockets with treasure. The French Fleet escaped.

General Cornwallis had been defeated in the Southern colonies. He badly needed reinforcements and, supplies. He holed up in the tiny village of Yorktown, Virginia. The American Revolutionary Army with French support trapped him by land. He was not concerned. He would be resupplied by the British Navy from the Sea. The resupply never came.

Rodney had stayed in Statia too long; he only sent part of his fleet North belatedly. Another part of his fleet carried Statia's and the Jew's treasure to England. For a tantalizing three month period in October of 1781, the French were the most powerful fleet in the North Atlantic. They met the British near the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay and defeated them.

Cornwallis' total defeat was inevitable. He surrendered to George Washington. The British had lost America.

The Jews of St. Eustatius were ruined. The survivors sought homes and shelter on other Islands. They were citizens of nowhere. Some founded the Jewish community of St. Thomas which is today part of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Statia's magnificent synagogue, Honen Dalim fell into decline and collapsed.

If Rodney's appetite for wealth had not been wetted by robbing the Jews and then everyone else, the American War would have ended differently. America may not have become the refuge of choice for millions of Jews fleeing anti-Semitism. British America may not have voted in favor of the United Nations Partition Resolution.



Honen Dalim
(Courtesy of Jerry Klinger)



Jewish Cemetery
(Courtesy of Jerry Klinger)

Statia, and her Jewish community, were the catalysts for the Birth of the Modern State of Israel. Honen Dalim's walls were rebuilt in 2001 as a tourist attraction. Her Jewish cemetery restored. Her Jewish history is honored and respected by Statia.

A new historic interpretive marker telling Statia's Jewish story will be placed by the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation, outside of Ft. Oranje, in March.

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