

**Phebe Stillwell to Col. Richard Somers**

**January 31, 1787**

Dr Sir

Cape May Janry 31<sup>st</sup> 1787

I am truly sorry this should inform you of the heavy loss we have met with, in losing an affectionate Husband, a loving Brother, and a tender Parent He departed this life (this morning about half after seven oclock) and his dying request was and hoped in God that you woud prove and affectionate Guardian to his helpless offspring, and look into his affairs, and settle them if possible, he died without a Will, and was at times very delirious, but was so that he knew he was advancing to the Verge of Eternity, and the only thing that seemed to trouble him was his Children he met his fate with that seeming fortitude as became a Christian but still had a desire to live, My Mind is in such a state that I hardly know what I am about, if any blemishes shoud appear in this short, but truly affecting Epithe, [epitaph] hope you will excuse, take the matter home to yourself and Judge of my unfortunat situation in leaving so tender a companion

I beg you will inform Sister Griffin [Sarah Stillwell Griffing, wife of Capt. Moses Griffing] of this and pray let me hear from you by the bearer Mr Benj Orum

I am D [Dear] Sir

Your Affecty [Affectionately]

Phebe Stillwill

## **Phebe Stillwell to Col. Richard Somers**

**January 31, 1787**

This somber letter reported the death of my fifth great-grandfather, Enoch Stillwell of Cape May County to his brother-in-law, Richard Somers Sr. who, though a native of Great Egg Harbour, Gloucester County (Somers Point), was probably living in Philadelphia at the time.

During the Revolution, Lt. Col. Enoch Stillwell served as a “field officer” in the Cape May militia, (see letter 10). He was also one of the region’s most successful privateer captains while serving as master of the privateer schooner *Hawk*, (10 guns, 50 men). He and his crew captured the British brig, *Lyon*, and schooner, *Henry* in 1779. Both vessels were laden with rum, Madeira wine, and other supplies and were likely the most valuable prizes taken in the Delaware Bay/Jersey coast region during the war.

Ironically, Phebe Stillwell’s letter to her husband’s brother-in law, Richard Somers is the only document known to this author showing that Enoch had remarried after the death of his wife, Sarah Savage Stillwell five years earlier. His late wife, Sarah was the mother of all of his children and no marriage record has been found for Enoch and Phebe, at least not in New Jersey.

In her note to Richard Somers, Phebe expressed her husband’s dying wishes; that his brother-in-law would see to his children’s welfare. She also requested that Enoch’s sister, Sarah Stillwell Griffing be notified of his death. Sarah was married to Capt. Moses Griffing who was another of the Cape May privateer captains.

As it happened, Richard Somers did become the legal guardian of most of Enoch Stillwell’s children. The son, Savage Stillwell would become a prominent Philadelphia ship owner and merchant. Daughter, Martha Stillwell would marry Joseph Hildreth in 1789, (my 4<sup>th</sup> great-grandparents), with whom she had a daughter, Lydia in 1790. Martha died a year later leaving a husband with an infant to care for. Two years later her younger sister, Anne would marry Joseph Hildreth, raise her infant niece and bear six children by him.

Dear Sir Cape May Jan<sup>y</sup> 31<sup>st</sup> 1787

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of the heavy loss we have met with, in losing an affectionate  
Husband, a loving ~~Friend~~ Brother and Tender Parent  
He departed this life this morning  
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only thing that seem'd to trouble him was his Children  
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in such a state that I hardly know what I am about,  
if any blemishes should appear, ~~in~~ in this short, but truly  
affecting Epistle, hope you will excuse, Take the  
matter ~~of~~ home to yourself, and judge of my  
unfortunate situation in losing so tender a companion

I beg you will inform Sister Gifford of this  
and pray let me hear from you by the bearer Mr  
Benjamin

I am D<sup>r</sup> Sir  
Yours affectly  
Phebe Stillwell

Mr Richard Somers

Phebe Stillwell informing her brother-in-law, Col. Richard Somers of the death of her husband, Lt. Col Enoch Stillwell, Jan 31, 1787, Private collection

**George Taylor Sr. to Col. Francis Gurney**  
**March 24, 1780**

I received your letter dated the 11 of this instant march which informed me that you received a bundle of money marked 4933 1/3 of Nathaniel Holmes and I paid to John Holms 5453 1/3 and took his receipt for the same and saw him mark the number on a paper witch he did the same up in so there is a mistake of 520 dollars and it was all large money and easey to be counted and likewise a receipt of paying Joseph Ball Eight thousand six hundred dollars more the whole dollars amountin to 5270 pounds and that order you rought to me conserning Allester and Ginn is 980 pounds makes me six thousand too hundred fifty pounds which is the sixteenth of a hundred thousand pounds and what ever pretence they have against the order I cannot tell they had 35 bushels of salt of me at 28 pounds a bushel which comes to 980 pounds which I am abel to prove by sufficient evidence anuf and constant Hughes engaged to fetch me that sum of money or a sufficient \_\_\_\_\_ from you for that sum of money and called evidence on the same as to these pretences I do not understand them how ever I have sent anorder by John Holms to Philadelphia to receive sum money for me and if he gits the money to pay you that order of it that you will set upon me the same order and I shall be at Philadelphia in a short time and settle the same ...

**George Taylor Sr. to Colonel Francis Gurney**  
**March 24, 1780**

At a glance this letter may appear to be rather dry reading, to put it nicely, but the short note actually reveals an incredible amount of information regarding the “ behind the scenes” details of the privateer trade during the American Revolution.

The recipient of the letter, Lt. Colonel Francis Gurney (1738-1815) was a mover and shaker in colonial Philadelphia and “had a finger in many pies”, so to speak. His accomplishments are too numerous to mention here; he was born in Doylestown, Bucks County, Pa. His long military career began at age 18 when he joined the Provincial Army. Gurney fought for the British in the French and Indian War, (Canada) and with the British fleet in the Caribbean. During the Revolution he fought against the British as a Captain, then Lt. Colonel with the Pennsylvania Militia and served on the Committee of Safety. He served as a Colonel during the Whiskey Rebellion and was promoted to General towards the end of his career. In addition to being a successful merchant in Philadelphia, he was appointed Port Warden of Philadelphia, served in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives & State Senate.

Interestingly, Gurney’s residence and place of business was within shouting distance, (25 doors) from Thomas Leaming’s in colonial Philadelphia’s Dock Ward, (see letters #8 & #11). Both men played a vital part in supplying military supplies and financial support to the American cause during the Revolution.

Surviving documents show that, Col. Francis Gurney of the Pennsylvania Militia was an investor



in Cape May-owned privateer vessels. The same can be said of John Holmes, the Irish-Protestant immigrant who arrived in Cape May County along with his three brothers a few years before the war broke out. Back in Ulster (Northern Ireland), the Holmes' were flax growers of relatively modest means. After their arrival in America, John the oldest brother amassed an incredible amount of wealth as a merchant, through land speculation and investing in privateer vessels.

The letter is the only document that the author has seen to date that ties Cape Island merchant and landowner, George Taylor Sr. to the privateer trade. The Taylors were one of the original European families to settle on the Cape, and this George Taylor, (wife Sarah Hand) was a descendant of George Taylor who had been appointed as the first County Clerk in 1693.

The primary purpose of the letter was to point out the discrepancy in the amount sent from Cape May by Taylor, and the amount that was received by Gurney in Philadelphia. It seems that John Holmes' had entrusted his younger brother, Nathaniel Holmes Sr. to serve as the "mule" who ferried the money from Cape May to Philadelphia. It remains a mystery as to what became of the 520 dollars that went missing; an amount that was a small fortune at the time.

During the Revolution, young Nathaniel Holmes served under Cape May privateer captains and later claimed some service in the county militia. He married, Hannah Hand, the daughter of wealthy tavern owner and County Sheriff, Daniel Hand. Nathaniel Holmes would later become a Major in the county militia and a wealthy merchant and landowner in his own right.

TO BE SOLD BY  
**F R A N C I S G U R N E Y,**  
The corner of Front and Union-streets,  
**R**EDWOOD and copperas; green and bohea tea;  
sugar, coffee and pepper; ruffled shirts; pins by the  
packet; spirits and Antigua rum; salt, &c. at the low-  
est prices for cash.

Imported goods for sale at Col. Francis Gurney's Philadelphia store, likely from captured British merchant ships, The Pennsylvania Packet, Aug 20, 1778, Philadelphia Pa. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society

*Jesse Hand Esq.* to Governor William Livingston  
April 8, 1782

Cape May April 8<sup>th</sup> 1782

Worthy Sir

I have received yours of ye 1<sup>st</sup> instant Together with a Commission for Captain Hand, [Col. Elijah Hand] for which Please Except my Acknowledgement of the favour; I am sorry to understand our

Magazine is in so bad Condition at this time of need I hear Mr. Townsend got no Ammunition So that we must have Recourse to our former Method for a Supply; This day there has been the Most Severe Canonade in our bay by Some Vessels about ten or twelve in Number I have heard on our Coast Since the war, who they were or in whose favour it Ended we have not heard but from appearances they were some New York Privateers, [Tories] amongs Some Merchant Men and I fear the latter Mostly or all taken, one Ship run aground and was boarded and Got off from a brig, we think the brig Might be the fair American; The Hyder Ally is not yet Come Down the bay, and if She was She is not of force by any Means Sufficient for the Combined force of the New York Criusers as there is four or five of them who take almost Everything that attempts to Pass; Your Excellency will Please Excuse me for the trouble of this Letter as the bearer Mr. Joseph Edwards Anckiously Requested it in favour of his unfortunate Son who was Lately Taken up for a Deserter in Trenton this Young Mans Case is most Certainly Very hard as he has done all in his Power to Make up for his Deficiency in the army having given a fellow a large Sum of Money to take his Place, whorun away before he Could Deliver him, and afterwards gave a Sergant Six half joannes [half-joes Portuguese coins] to Enlist a Man in his Room which he thought was done as their was a Man Enlisted with the Money; And if good offices in a Deserter Merits favours he May be Intitled to Some, having been So Extremely Active in Distressing the Refugees [Tory privateers], and Annoying the Common Enemy no less than two Express boats from Clinton to Cornwallis was Captured by him, one the Mail was Saved and is Said was of Great Consiquence So that it is Much to be Doubted whether his Service in the Army would have been of half So Much Consiquence to the United States as it has been in the present case, not that it would in future be to this State if he Could be Set at Liberty. I know he does not fall within your Excellencys line but as I like wise know your Excellencys Interest in the Matter would do a great deal with the Gentlemen of the Army (with whom I have Scarce a Slight Acquaintance) I would therefore Pray in behalf of the Distressed Mr. Edwards that your Excellency would Enterpose your kind offices in his favour. Give me Leave to Subscribe myself Your Excellencys Sincere friend and Very Humble Servant

Jesse Hand

***Jesse Hand Esq. to Governor William Livingston***

**April 8, 1782**

The author of this letter, Jesse Hand, (1738-1791) was a major political figure in Cape May County before, during and after the American Revolution. He served, as the delegate from Cape May to the second New Jersey Provisional Convention, the Committee of Public Safety from 1777-1781, was a member of the State Legislature from 1779 to 1784. During the war years he was also the "Agent of Forfeited Estates" for Cape May County, charged with disposing of any properties owned by Tories or British nationals.

It is safe to say that Jesse Hand was a natural leader, but he was also very well connected. His wife, Sarah was the daughter of Aaron Leaming Jr., the wealthiest man in the county, (letters #8 & #11). Their daughter, Sarah was married to Constant Somers, the oldest son of Col. Richard Somers of neighboring "Great Egg Harbour". Jesse's not-so-distant cousins included Elijah Hand, Nicholas Stillwell, and Enoch Stillwell; all three militia colonels and privateer captains.

In addition to running his plantation on the “seaside” in Middle Township, Jesse Hand also owned a salt works during the Revolution with his father-in-law Aaron Leaming and merchant John Holmes, (letter #12). He and John Holmes were also co-investors in privateer vessels.

Hand’s letter to the governor of New Jersey reveals details regarding the war effort and goings on in South Jersey during the Revolution. He first reports on the lack of military stores on the Cape, then gives an account of what would become known as the “Battle of the Delaware Bay”, in which the American privateer, *Hyder Ally*, (16 guns) defeated and captured the British warship, *General Monk*, (24 guns). Jesse Hand reported on the naval battle in “realtime”, though he was not aware that the *Hyder Ally* had indeed reached the Cape and was one of the two major combatants in the fight.

Well more than half of the letter is devoted to pleading the case of Joseph Edwards Jr., one of Cape May’s young privateer captains who had been arrested for desertion, although Edwards had paid two different individuals to serve in his place. Hand points out that Capt. Edwards’ service as a privateer far outweighed anything he could have done as an enlisted soldier towards the patriot cause.

**We are informed, that a few days ago Jesse Hand, Esq; of Cape May, came to this city with a genteel sum of money, generously subscribed by the people of that place, to be laid out for the use of the suffering poor of Boston.**

The news report of Cape May politician, Jesse Hand’s visit to Philadelphia reveals his county’s response to the harsh treatment that the inhabitants of Massachusetts received from the British, *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford). Nov. 21, 1774.

*Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society*

State of New-Jersey, }  
Cape-May county, } **W**HEREAS inquisition was  
found, and final judgment entered in favour of the state of New-Jersey, in the county of Gloucester, in December term, 1778, against John Hatton, late of said county of Gloucester, collector of the customs to the King of Great-Britain:

*Notice is hereby given,*

That in pursuance of such judgment, and in virtue of the act of Assembly in that case provided, all the lands, tenements and estate, of said John Hatton, which can be found in the county of Cape-May aforesaid, will be exposed to sale, at publick vendue, on Saturday the 29th of May next, at 11 o'clock in the forenoon, at the house of Thomas Buck, innkeeper in the Lower Precinct of said county; where attendance will be given by  
**JESSE HAND**, Agent of forfeited estates for said county.

N. B. Gold and silver money, officers' and soldiers' notes given for depreciation of their pay, contractors' certificates, and collectors' surplus certificates, will be taken in payment for said estates.

April 23, 1784.

4W||

Legal notice advertising the sale of the forfeited estate of British Collector of Customs, John Hatton, *New Jersey Gazette*, April 26, 1784. *Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society*

Legal notice advertising the sale of the forfeited estate of British Collector of Customs, John Hatton, *New Jersey Gazette*, April 26, 1784. *Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society*