According to the treaty marking the end of the American War of Independence, Congress was to recommend the restoration of lands confiscated by the new states from "real British subjects." This provision has been overshadowed by those dealing with the property of genuine American Loyalists. Certainly, Loyalists and their lands merit attention, but the fact remains that in 1776 significant quantities of real estate in America belonged to British subjects who were true absentees, many of whom had never been to the colonies. However, we know little about this group, the management of their property before the war, the steps taken by the new governments respecting their estates, and the shape the American Revolution assumes when viewed from the position of absentee landownership.

This study describes the career during the Revolution of one English company, the West Jersey Society, which held valuable lands in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Although peculiar in its character and experience, the Society was a bona fide absentee, with the important exception of one American shareholder; it probably was the largest single landowner in New Jersey; and it was actively engaged in seeking profits from its properties. Thus, despite its uniqueness, the West Jersey Society affords a window for observing the Revolution from a seldom used perspective.

In the long, troubled history of the West Jersey Society, the American Revolution appears as only the most dramatic adversity which the company suffered. The Society had its birth in 1692, when forty-eight Londoners became shareholders in a joint-stock company formed to purchase the American holdings of Dr. Daniel Coxe. From Coxe, the new organization acquired some twenty proprietary shares in the province of West Jersey, two and a half shares in East Jersey, and 10,000 acres in Pennsylvania. Also, Coxe conveyed his claim to the sole right of government in West Jersey. Supervision of the Society's business was entrusted to a thirteen-man committee, elected by all shareholders at an annual meeting. Failure
and frustration plagued the company from the beginning. The English government refused a patent of incorporation, several trading ventures went awry, and no profits accrued from the sale of lands. By 1703, the company had abandoned commerce and had surrendered its political pretensions to the Crown, henceforth directing its energies solely toward liquidation of its American estate.¹

In the early eighteenth century, it became clear that the most important figure in the company was not one of the officers in London, but the agent commissioned by the committee to manage the Society’s affairs in America, and that the greatest defect in the company’s structure was not the want of a charter, but the committee’s inability to control the agent. Prior to the 1760’s, the committee conferred such broad powers upon the American agent that he could conduct the company’s business however he chose. Practically every man who occupied the agency found it personally advantageous to be less than conscientious in his management. In addition to supervising all aspects of land sales, the agent was the chief source of the committee’s knowledge of conditions in America, including information vital for an accurate appraisal of the agent’s own performance. Sometimes misinformed and more frequently uninformed, the committee had no firm understanding of the Society’s affairs in America. Certainly this was the case during the agency of Dr. Lewis Johnston, appointed in 1749. Johnston’s failure to correspond regularly, to remit funds to London, and to forward accounts of lands sold and monies received was primarily responsible for the committee’s adoption of a policy still in effect when the crisis of American independence arose.

In 1761, after years of pleading with Johnston, the committee revoked his broad commission, substituting one which prohibited

further land sales. Even this demonstration of mistrust did not jar
the agent into compliance. He contended that he had “not one
farthing” of the company’s funds in his possession, and when his
long-awaited accounts did arrive, they proved confused and in-
complete. By the late 1760’s, both Johnston and the committee
were marking time, pending the appointment of a new agent, among
whose tasks would be settling accounts with Johnston, discovering
what he had been up to, and so ordering the company’s affairs that
the business of selling land could be resumed.

Roughly three fourths of the company’s original estate had been
sold by the time of the ban on further sales. In West Jersey, the
Society had received the rights to over a half million acres as its
proportion of five land dividends authorized from time to time by
the Council of West Jersey Proprietors. Most of these rights had
actually been taken up, that is surveys of tracts had been made and
then approved by the Council. All of these properties had been
sold, except for a half dozen tracts totalling 118,000 acres located
in the southern counties of Gloucester, Salem, and Cumberland.
The bulk of the unsold lands were poorly suited for agricultural
purposes, being valuable only for timber. The Society also had a
balance of 100,000 acres in yet unused rights to survey and retained
possession of its twenty-odd shares. Since in the 1760’s there re-
mained no tract of unsurveyed land in West Jersey sufficient to
meet even a substantial part of the rights to survey, they consti-
tuted a questionable component of the Society’s estate. The same
was also true for the company’s West Jersey shares, since it was
unlikely, short of some extraordinary development, that there would
ever be a sixth dividend of any consequence.

The entire East Jersey estate had been sold, including the So-

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2 Johnston actually shared the agency first with Henry Lane and then John Smith; how-
ever, neither Lane nor Smith was active in the Society’s services. The records of the West
Jersey Society (hereinafter cited as WJSR) are in the Public Records Office, London, and
are available on microfilm in the Rutgers University Library. See Committee Minutes for
July 16 and 22, 1761, WJSR, TS 12/17, 4-6; Revocation of Commission to Lane and Johnston,
Aug. 5, 1761, and Commission to Johnston and Smith, Aug. 6, 1761, ibid., TS 12/6, 38;
Committee to Johnston and Smith, Aug. 6, 1761, ibid., 40; Johnston and Smith to Society,
June 24, 1767, ibid., TS 12/1, 164-166.

3 The most authoritative description of the company’s estate before the Revolution is
the inventory prepared by John Hunt in 1775, ibid., TS 12/51, 1-30. See also Lewis John-
ston’s “Sales of Land in Several Tracts . . .” [1765], ibid., 12/62, 65-68.
ciety's two and one half shares in that division. Many East Jersey properties had been purchased at low prices and on generous terms by relatives and associates of the agent, Lewis Johnston. With the company divested of the best lands in New Jersey, the most valuable single holding in the 1760's was 10,000 acres of rich farm land in Chester County, Pennsylvania. However, for thirty years a legal obstruction had prevented the Society from capitalizing on its Chester title. This complex affair originated in 1686, when William Penn conveyed equal proportions of a 30,000-acre tract to Dr. Coxe, Sir Matthias Vincent, and Major Robert Thompson. Both Coxe and Vincent complied with the several conditions required of them by the conveyance, but only Vincent's title received confirmation from the Penns. When the Society asserted its claim in the late 1730's, the Penns contested, charging noncompliance by Coxe with the original terms. Both sides began preparations to resolve the issue in the courts, but the case never came to trial.4

In the meantime, the disputed tract had been occupied by settlers. The Society negotiated leases with the occupants of what was regarded as its share of the remaining 20,000 acres, the tenants acknowledging the company's ownership and agreeing to purchase the lands when the title was finally cleared. No one had yet asserted the long silent Thompson claim, thus providing an opportunity for some enterprising speculator. Lewis Johnston's toleration of delays in bringing the Chester dispute before the courts was another cause of the committee's dissatisfaction with him.

Thus, at the time of Johnston's replacement in 1768, the Society's affairs were in a peculiar state. Aware of its own ignorance and impotence, the committee had instituted a no-sell policy, thereby contravening the very purpose of the company. Although Johnston had lost the confidence of the committee in 1761, he had nevertheless remained agent for seven more years, much to the neglect of the company's interests. Obviously, the Society would be best served by two developments, the appointment of a conscientious, capable substitute for Johnston and an extended period of public stability, during which the new agent could place the company's business on

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4 Conveyance from William Penn to Daniel Coxe, Apr. 20, 1686, ibid., TS 12/1, 15; Notes on Case of Thomas and Richard Penn (Lessors) and Robert Ralston (Tenant), n.d., ibid., 5–6; Memorandum on Chester Tract, n.d., ibid., 2–3; William Thynn to Society, Apr. 28, 1744, ibid., 56–57.
a proper footing. Almost miraculously, the first of these requirements was met, and John Hunt, who replaced Johnston, proved to be the most honest, persistent, and loyal agent ever employed by the company. However, within a few years of Hunt’s appointment, revolution and war produced public upheaval, and the Society shortly found itself an alien and enemy landowner, its property located in a new, embattled republic.

Amidst such conditions, any agent would have faced insurmountable problems, and in this case they were aggravated by a dimension of Hunt’s life which probably had been of little moment to the committee at the time of his appointment. Hunt was an important and active figure in the transatlantic community of Friends. Prior to 1765, he lived in London, his home being a regular stop for New World Quakers visiting in England. In his worldly pursuits of trade, insurance, and other commercial undertakings, Hunt was frequently associated with American Friends. He played a significant role during the crisis of the mid-1750’s resulting from the refusal of strict Quakers in Pennsylvania to accept war taxes. After seeking to explain the position of his American co-religionists to the English authorities, he was sent by the London Yearly Meeting to Philadelphia to work out a solution acceptable to the government in England and consistent with the Friends’ peace witness.⁵

In 1765, Hunt and part of his family again crossed the Atlantic to make a permanent home in Philadelphia.⁶ Once in America, he continued his trading career and also engaged in land investments on behalf of himself and as a representative for others. Either by design or accident, Hunt became thoroughly familiar with the situation of the West Jersey Society. Returning to England in 1768 to fetch two daughters, he approached the committee, which accepted his offer to serve the company as its American agent.⁷

⁵ A brief biographical note on Hunt appears in Amelia Mott Gummere (ed.), The Journal and Essays of John Woolman (New York, 1922), 511-512. See also Theodore Thayer, Israel Pemberton, King of the Quakers (Philadelphia, 1943), 113, 116-120, 159-161, and passim.

⁶ In 1793, Robert Morris of New Jersey, then the Society’s agent, wrote that “Hunt had come to America a Bankrupt.” An unsatisfied financial debt in Hunt’s past is also suggested in a letter written by a close associate at the time of Hunt’s death in 1778. Morris to Society, Feb. 28, 1793, WJSR, TS 12/2 (there is no pagination for TS 12/2); “Letter from Thomas Wharton to Thomas Corbyn and Joseph Talwin in London, May 11, 1778,” in Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXXIV (1910), 57-60.

⁷ For Hunt’s involvement in New Jersey lands prior to his association with the Society, see Council of West Jersey Proprietors, Minutes for Feb. 6, 1765, and Nov. 6, 1766, Minute
Along with routine chores, the committee gave Hunt three special assignments: settling accounts with Johnston, bringing the long delayed Chester dispute to trial, and preparing a complete description of the Society’s estate. Dr. Lewis Johnston met the new agent with the same resistance he had previously offered the committee—procrastination, denials of retaining company funds, and withholding information. Upon Johnston’s refusal to surrender the Society’s papers, Hunt turned to the public record of land transactions in the provincial capitals of Perth Amboy and Burlington. By a painstaking reconstruction of the twenty-year agency, Hunt discovered gross errors in the accounts his predecessor had submitted to the committee. Gentle in his direct encounters with the aging and often ailing former agent, Hunt dealt bluntly with James Parker, an advisor to Johnston. When Hunt threatened to take the matter into open court “where it would be difficult for the Doctor to support the character of an honest man,” Parker persuaded his client to accept private arbitration by three referees. In July, 1773, the referees reported a finding whereby the debt due the company was set at somewhat more than £10,000 sterling.

Not only did Hunt provide the proof of Johnston’s staggering peculation, he also sought to guarantee restitution. Before agreeing to arbitration, the former agent, at Hunt’s insistence, had executed several bonds totalling £2,000 payable to the company and had conveyed certain of his own lands in trust to Hunt, Parker, and John Stevens, who were to sell whatever necessary to make good the debt as determined by arbitration. These precautions appeared so secure as to be unaffected by Johnston’s death in 1774.8

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8 The agent’s handling of the Johnston account is reported in numerous letters sent to the committee between September, 1769, and February, 1774, WJSR, TS 12/1, 168-232, and Hunt’s “Remarks, etc. on Dr. Lewis Johnston’s Account . . . 1765,” n.d., ibid., TS 12/62, 17-20; Agreement to Arbitrate, Apr. 22, 1773, ibid., 98-101; Deed of Reference Executed by Johnston and Hunt, Jan. 4, 1773, ibid., 94-96; Judgement of Arbitrators, July 20, 1773, ibid., 3-4; “Dr. Lewis Johnston of Perth Amboy, His Account Current . . ., 1773,” ibid. TS 12/51, 27-28.
The Society's agent faced much stiffer opposition in the Chester dispute. Confronting him was not one sick, frightened old man, advised by a single East Jersey attorney, but the Proprietors of Pennsylvania, represented by a striking battery of legal talents, John Dickinson, James Tilghman, and the chief justice of the province, Benjamin Chew. Aware of the weakness of their case, the attorneys for the Penns continued the tactics of delay, and for a time Chew, as chief justice, simply neglected the appointment of judges for the Chester circuit court. Once judges were selected, a series of postponements of the trial ensued. After no further delays were possible, Chew and the others sought an out-of-court compromise. However, assured by the company's attorneys—Nicholas Wain, John Ross, and Joseph Galloway—that they could win in court, Hunt persisted in his demand for a trial. In August, 1773, the case was finally heard, and the jury speedily reached a verdict confirming the Society's title.

With the removal of the thirty-year-old legal obstruction, only one step remained before Hunt could carry out arrangements made with the tenants for payment of back rents and for sale at prices already agreed upon. A survey of the company's particular 10,000 acres was required, since there never had been a formal separation of its portion of the tract, the remainder coming under the old Thompson title. The habit of delay persisted among proprietary forces, and it took Hunt eighteen months to obtain from the surveyor general's office a warrant authorizing the survey. Issuance of that warrant in November, 1774, however, seemed to place profits from the Chester tract finally within the Society's reach.9

Hunt received a handsome commission from the company for his successes in the Johnston arbitration and the Chester trial. The agent's third special assignment, making an inventory of the Society's American interests, promised no such reward. That Hunt applied himself to this task with as much care as displayed in the more profitable chores testifies to his fidelity to the company. Although not a dramatic accomplishment, the finished report, sent to London in 1775, was of major significance, since it provided the

9 See Hunt's letter to the committee written between March, 1770, and October, 1774, ibid., TS 12/1, 170-242; Warrant to Survey, John Penn to John Hunt, Nov. 3, 1774, ibid., TS 12/62, 50.
committee with its first detailed picture of the estate in America since the early part of the century.  

Besides the special tasks assigned to him, Hunt had responsibility for the general management of the Society's affairs in America. Essentially this involved securing the company's interests against loss, damage, or dispute. Except for a few bona fide tenants, the Society's lands in New Jersey were legally lying idle, not being occupied or otherwise put to use. This legal picture did not conform to reality, and preserving the company's properties from actual violation proved a difficult task.

An absentee owner with large sprawling tracts in the less inhabited parts of New Jersey, the Society was vulnerable to several kinds of encroachments. Curiously, Hunt was apparently untroubled by agriculturally inclined squatters, content to till minute parcels of other people's lands. Trespassing for the purpose of cutting and removing timber constituted Hunt's main concern, and he estimated that over the years timber thieves had inflicted £3,000 in damages to the company's large tract on the Great Egg Harbor River. Encroachments of a somewhat more sophisticated variety also worried Hunt. Holders of property adjacent to that of the Society sometimes made sizeable intrusions into the company's tracts. Finally, Hunt had to guard against injury to the Society's interests resulting from decisions of the Council of Proprietors. During the Hunt years, the chief antagonist in the Council was its president, Colonel Daniel Coxe, heir of Dr. Coxe, and an influential lawyer, member of the governor's council, and large landholder in his own right.

In protecting the Society against these various dangers, Hunt employed a wide range of tactics. Least successful was his campaign against timber thieves. Circulation of notices threatening legal action, visits by the agent to the tracts being entered, employment of men on the spot to maintain watch, a handful of prosecutions, and efforts to eliminate the market for illicit timber by

10 For Hunt's charges of commission, see his accounts with the Society drawn up in 1773, 1775, and 1785, ibid., TS 12/51, 23-26A, and TS 12/62, 36. Hunt's thirty-page inventory is found in ibid., 12/51.

11 Hunt to Society, Mar. 1, 1770, ibid., TS 12/1, 170-172. For data on Coxe, see Leonard Lundin, Cockpit of the Revolution: The War for Independence in New Jersey (Princeton, 1940), 76.
arrangements with sawmill operators—all these and other steps caused some curtailment of raids on the company's timber, but were insufficient to prevent continued loss to the Society. Protection against encroachments by other landowners was secured by constant surveillance of boundaries and by resurveys of lines which had become uncertain through the ravages of time or the deliberate destruction of corner trees and other reference points. Hunt's attendance at meetings of the Council of Proprietors enabled him to forestall approval of surveys or resurveys within any of the Society's tracts and also to keep an eye on Colonel Coxe's activities.12

By virtue of a conveyance from his great-grandfather to his grandfather, Coxe was the likely beneficiary of any reduction in the Society's title to West Jersey shares. Accordingly, Hunt identified him as the instigator of a challenge to the company's title made by the Council in 1771. When the agent applied for approval of several resurveys and new surveys of small parcels of unappropriated land he had discovered, the Council refused, arguing that the Society had four less proprietary shares than claimed. Because of Hunt's vigorous defense of his employer's interests, no loss was sustained by the company. Hunt linked the challenge to Coxe's enthusiasm for a movement which resulted in the Council's declaration of a new, sixth land dividend of 1,500 acres per share. This peculiar bonanza was based on the claim that the boundary between East and West Jersey had been moved eastward by the recent relocation of the New York-New Jersey dividing line. Skeptical of the whole business, Hunt was nevertheless twice appointed by the Council as a West Jersey spokesman in negotiations with the East Jersey proprietors, who forcefully denied the alleged change in the boundary line.13

Although Hunt took no part in the negotiations, his selection by the Council suggests an alteration in its attitude toward the com-

12 See Hunt's letters to the committee sent between March, 1770, and April, 1774, WJSR, TS 12/1, 170-235; Society to Hunt, June 30, 1773, ibid., TS 12/6, 64-66.
pany. Whereas in 1771 Hunt angrily reported that the Council "treated the Society, the largest proprietor, with less respect than a private person with a very small share," by 1775 it was clearly established that the Society was not to be slighted. This improvement conforms to the general upswing in the affairs of the company during the first six years of Hunt's agency. The account with Johnston had been settled, the Chester title was finally cleared, tracts in New Jersey were being protected, and the committee possessed an authoritative statement of the Society's whole estate. Having now in its services a conscientious agent, the committee was in a position to rescind the ban of 1761 and resume selling the remaining properties. However, a sharp reversal occurred in the affairs of the Society, chiefly owing to the course of the American Revolution. Difficulties also resulted from the intervention of the only member of the Society to live in America, Joseph Reed, a young lawyer with an eager eye for the main chance.

From 1772 to 1784, except for a five-year interruption occasioned by the war, Reed engaged in various transatlantic maneuvers respecting the Society, utilizing his brother-in-law, Dennis DeBerdt, to further his interests in England. Reed became convinced that the Society and its estate constituted a good investment, and through DeBerdt he purchased sixty-five shares in the company. He also toyed with the prospect of buying out the Society, lock, stock, and barrel, but made no progress along these lines before the war. As one of the largest shareholders, Reed expected to influence the committee's decisions, especially concerning the agency. At the very least, he hoped to have some control over Hunt, and his ultimate ambition was to replace the Quaker as agent. Finally, it was Reed who seized the opportunity arising from the neglected Thompson title at Chester.

Shortly after the verdict of the Chester circuit court, Reed instructed DeBerdt to seek out the Thompson heirs in England. Contact was established and arrangements made for the sale of the Thompson title to Reed and two partners, Thomas Willing and

14 Reed to DeBerdt, Aug. 3, 1772, Reed Letter Book, 2–6; Reed to DeBerdt, Jan. 4, 1772[3], ibid., 32–36; Reed to DeBerdt, Aug. 8, 1773, ibid., 58–63; DeBerdt to Reed, May 6, 1772, Reed MSS, II, Joseph Reed Papers; DeBerdt to Reed, Nov. 4, 1772, ibid. Informative is John F. Roche, Joseph Reed, A Moderate in the American Revolution (New York, 1957).
Robert Morris, both of Philadelphia. Since Major Thompson had not met the conditions of the original conveyance, Reed preferred not to risk a contest with the Penns. His strategy was to claim that Thompson and Dr. Coxe had been tenants in common, that their interests had been one and the same. Therefore, Reed obstructed any action which would recognize the Society's title as separate and distinct from that of the three Philadelphia partners. For example, Reed petitioned the governor of Pennsylvania to suspend the warrant authorizing the survey in Chester for the Society. The governor complied, halting the survey and referring the whole matter to the Penns in England. Reed also circulated notices warning the settlers against transactions which ignored his claim. As Hunt bitterly noted, Reed instituted these bold measures even before he, Willing, and Morris had become legally possessed of the Thompson title. However shaky Reed's legal footing, his intervention completely disrupted Hunt's endeavors for the Society. Uncertain of whose lands they occupied and threatened by Reed with prosecution for negotiating with Hunt, the settlers refused to pay arrears on existing leases, to sign new leases, or to purchase the land as they had previously agreed. Even before the Revolution intruded, the Society's proceedings at Chester had been brought to a standstill.  

In addition to frustrating the company's expectations at Chester, Reed's various activities antagonized Hunt personally, especially the efforts to replace the Quaker in the agency. Clearly Reed's prospects at Chester would be enhanced by the cooperation of the Society, and cooperation would be almost guaranteed if Reed himself became agent. However, Reed displayed ambitions for the agency even before his attention was drawn to the Thompson title. In 1772 he informed DeBerdt of these aspirations, and for the next two years DeBerdt promoted them by lobbying among members of the Society in London. Recognizing the committee's attachment to Hunt, Reed urged caution upon his brother-in-law when suggesting

15 See Reed's letters to DeBerdt written from August, 1773, through September, 1774, Reed Letter Book, 63-112; Reed to Jared Ingersoll, Apr. 3, 1774, ibid., 94-95; DeBerdt to Reed, Nov. 3, 1773, Reed MSS, II; Reed to Society, July 11, 1774, loc. cit.; Reed to Society, Feb. 11, 1775, WJSR, TS 12/1, 247-249; Reed's Notice to Chester Tenants, Mar. 10, 1775, ibid., TS 12/59, 10. For Hunt's reports of Reed's activities, see his letters to the Society sent between August, 1773, and August, 1775, ibid., TS 12/1, 220-256.
alterations in the agency. And Reed himself was hard pressed to furnish DeBerdt with reasons why the committee should dump Hunt. In 1774, Reed wrote directly to the committee, and, although not specifically recommending the removal of Hunt, he included a number of criticisms of the agent’s performance and character. In a second letter, Reed did not return to the attack, perhaps convinced that for the time being little could be done to undermine the committee’s faith in their agent.\textsuperscript{16}

Indeed, despite some reports of DeBerdt to the contrary, the committee never wavered in its support of Hunt. Reed’s first letter elicited only a brief and formal reply, and in the meantime Hunt received reassurances from the committee and instructions to ignore the American shareholder.\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, Reed’s presence handicapped Hunt. The agent might have experienced some relief when Reed departed from Philadelphia in June, 1775, had it not been for the emergence of new problems of an exceedingly grave nature.

The immediate consequences for the West Jersey Society arising from revolution and war consisted first of the creation of difficulties in Hunt’s prosecution of the company’s business, followed by the cessation of communications between agent and committee and by the curtailment of Hunt’s activities. Then came the removal of Hunt himself by arrest, exile, and death.

Perhaps had it been engaged in retailing land or some other business more sensitive to political and economic shifts, the company might have been more noticeably affected by the course of events prior to Lexington and Concord. But not until May, 1775, did Hunt take note of the “unsettled and confused Situation of Public affairs.” Subsequently he briefly mentioned his inability to use the courts, which prompted “designing men” to withhold payment of just debts. Hunt’s endeavors also suffered from a general curtailment of commercial activity, it being the agent’s prediction that shortly “business would be almost totally stagnated.” Hunt’s last communication to the committee was a short letter written in August, 1775. Again remarking on the difficulties of doing business, he none-

\textsuperscript{16} DeBerdt to Reed, Nov. 4, 1772, \textit{loc. cit.}; Reed to DeBerdt, Dec. 24, 1773, Reed Letter Book, 77–81; Reed to Society, July 11, 1774, \textit{loc. cit.}; Reed to Society, Feb. 11, 1775, \textit{loc. cit.}

\textsuperscript{17} Society to Hunt, July 22, 1774, \textit{WJSR}, TS 12/6, 70–72; Society to Reed, Dec. 1, 1774, \textit{ibid.}, 72.
theless expected to receive a sizeable payment from the executors of Johnston's estate. On this rather hopeful note, the flow of letters from Hunt to the committee ceased.

As a matter of fact, Hunt failed to receive any sizeable sums on the Johnston account. Following the former agent's death in 1774, some of the trust lands had been sold and other funds collected from the executors. But by the time the war began, the bulk of the debt remained outstanding, and the Society never collected all that was due it. Once again, as in the case of the Chester tract, the bright prospects of 1773 were not realized.

Beginning in the summer of 1775, Hunt generally became a far less energetic agent. Whereas previously he had annually spent from twenty-three to sixty-one days traveling on the Society's business, he was on the road only two days during the remainder of his agency. By the time of the Declaration of Independence, Hunt had all but ceased his activity on behalf of the company.

A curious indifference and passivity characterized the response of the committee in London to the disruption within the empire. The Society engaged in no attempts to make its circumstances or sentiments known to the authorities in England or otherwise to influence the government's decisions. In none of the committee's minutes or letters to the agent was there even mention of the worsening relations between England and her colonies. The last letter to Hunt, written in March, 1776, contained questions and directions relating to his inventory of the Society's estate, which had arrived the previous September. Apparently the committee experienced no sense of urgency and anticipated that Hunt would be able to carry on business as usual. When letters ceased to arrive from the agent, the committee practically folded, and the Society's affairs in England were handled by the annual court until 1783. The company did not seek to contact its agent or anyone else in America, although

18 Hunt to Society, May 19, July 24, and Aug. 3, 1775, ibid., TS 12/1, 250-256. The difficult economic conditions prevailing in New Jersey in 1775 are described in Edward A. Fuhlbreugge, An Abstract of New Jersey Finances During the American Revolution (New York, 1937), 4-6.

19 Since Hunt received a per diem and expenses for his travels, his accounts serve as an index of his activity; see accounts of 1773, 1775, and 1785.

20 Society to Hunt, Mar. 25, 1776, WJSR, TS 12/6, 77-78. For the proceedings of the committee and general court during the war years, see TS 12/17, 37-42.
letters were being exchanged by other pre-war correspondents, such as Reed and DeBerdt and London and Philadelphia Quakers. Indeed, it was from London Friends that the Society learned of the fate of John Hunt.

Described by a contemporary American Friend as "a great, wise and experienced minister and elder," Hunt became a victim of the Patriots' suspicion of Quaker neutrality. That suspicion assumed critical dimensions in the summer of 1777, when a British army landed at the Head of Elk and marched on Philadelphia. Acting on a resolution of the Continental Congress, authorities in Pennsylvania rounded up a number of Quakers, including John Hunt. Hunt, Israel Pemberton, and Samuel Pleasants challenged the proceedings at every step but to no avail. Refusing to affirm allegiance to the new state or to give assurances of their good behavior if paroled, Hunt and twenty-one other Friends were taken to exile in Winchester, Virginia. In February, 1778, Hunt became critically ill, suffering among other maladies from "mortification" of his left leg. An amputation in March was followed quickly by his death. Several months later, the Quaker exiles were permitted to return to Philadelphia, and one of them wrote to Hunt's acquaintances in London suggesting they inform the company of its agent's death.

Hunt's connection with the West Jersey Society appears unrelated to his arrest and exile. Americans who before the war represented British owners of land in the colonies were not automatically suspected of Loyalist tendencies, and the official Pennsylvania records mention only Hunt's position as a Quaker leader. Not Hunt's services for the West Jersey Society, but his membership in the Society of Friends and the political posture he shared with other Quakers led to his arrest.

The period from the summer of 1777 to the autumn of 1781 constitutes a "critical era" for the West Jersey Society. Two alterations made the Society vulnerable. The removal of Hunt eliminated the only person in America charged with protecting the company's interests, and private individuals were now free to move against the

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21 James Pemberton, as quoted in Gummere, 511-512.
company and onto its lands. Furthermore, revolution and war transformed the Society from a company in London possessing real estate in English colonies to a group of absentee, alien, indeed enemy, investors, claiming title to property in two sovereign states of a new nation. By enactment of the American legislatures, the estates of Loyalists were being confiscated, and for many Patriots there was no ideological strain in extending confiscatory policies to include the property of British subjects other than Loyalists. And, in addition to ideology, unprecedented wartime demands on public treasuries drew attention to such lands as a possible source of revenue.

Most secure against the encroachments of private parties was the Society’s tract at Chester, since it had been carved into farms by the settlers, who could be counted on to defend them as their own property. A different situation prevailed in New Jersey. In 1780, the legislature re-enacted with stiffer penalties the colonial law against timber theft, suggesting a continuation and probably an intensification of that kind of damage to unoccupied lands, including those of the Society. More permanent trespasses also occurred, and an estimated 200 families became squatters on the company’s tracts at Great Egg Harbor, Galloway, Maurice River and other townships. Hunt’s disappearance also allowed legitimate holders of lands adjacent to the property of the Society to ignore boundary lines and enlarge their holdings at the expense of the company. On the other hand, the years 1777–1781 did not witness the adoption by the Council of Proprietors of any measures detrimental to the Society.


24 Unlike its counterpart in East Jersey, the Council of West Jersey Proprietors met fairly regularly throughout the war, except for several occasions when scheduled meetings were cancelled because of “the difficulty of the times.” The Council routinely acted upon matters involving English proprietors. For example, in November, 1778, warrants to survey were issued to John Lee as agent for Elizabeth Wellington of Great Britain. CWJP, Minute Book C, 191–195. Probably the Society benefitted with respect to the Council and otherwise from Colonel Coxe’s going over to the British in 1776.
In the political arena, the New Jersey legislature inflicted the greatest damage to the company, but not through a program of direct confiscation. Confiscatory measures adopted in New Jersey and Pennsylvania so defined Loyalists as to exclude the Society and other British subjects in similar circumstances. The New Jersey lands of such owners were, however, affected by a wartime revenue program.

In 1778, the legislature passed a comprehensive tax bill which for the first time included unoccupied and unimproved lands as taxable property. Recognizing the existence in the state of large tracts belonging to absentee owners, the legislators made provision for non-payment by such owners. After being notified by local tax collectors of a delinquency, justices of the peace were authorized to issue writs to constables empowering them to seize and sell sufficient "timber, wood, herbage, or whatever" from the property in question to pay the tax. Also of importance were provisions for lands of absentees held by tenants. If the tenant paid the tax, it could be deducted from the rent due the owner. If neither tenant nor owner made tax payment, the land and the tenant's effects were subject to seizure and sale. Although in New Jersey the Society had no legitimate tenants to speak of, this provision both created pressure and provided the opportunity for squatters to pay the tax and gain some pretense of lawful possession.

Under the provisions of the revenue laws, local officials in six separate proceedings seized over 30,000 acres of the Society's lands and for all practical purposes leased them for periods of seven or ten years. The first seizure occurred in May, 1779, at the hands of the constable at Maurice River Township. For a payment of £97 10s in highly depreciated currency, two inhabitants acquired 4,000 acres of the Society's lands for seven years, gaining the right "to have & to hold & peaceably occupy" that property and "to work & carry off to market or elsewhere all the Pine, Cedar & Oak. . . ." In addition to the six seizures, squatters paid the land tax, thus attaining the status of legal tenants in the eyes of local officials.

The number of such tax-paying squatters cannot be determined, but some eighty of them signed a petition protesting the intervention of Joseph Reed, who sought to end the abuse of the tax program as well as to recover the lands legally seized.26

Reed’s appearance in October, 1781, as agent for the Society terminated the critical period for the company. Although difficulties and dangers persisted, including the prospect of official confiscation, the worst in fact was over. Four years without an agent had been costly but not fatal. On the Society’s lands were scores of timber thieves, tax-paying and nontax-paying squatters, and legal purchasers of occupancy rights. If the Chester tenants protected the Society’s tract against intruders, they did so with the growing conviction that they were or should be the real owners. Of course the outstanding debt of Lewis Johnston went unattended. Death, defection to the British, passive loyalty, and relocation out of state had scattered or silenced the Johnston heirs, bondholders, and trustees.27 On the other hand, the company’s legal title remained intact. The state of New Jersey was moving toward a comprehensive plan for lands belonging to English owners, but that plan admitted the appointment by the legislature of Joseph Reed to the hitherto vacant agency of the West Jersey Society.

Events had suddenly and spectacularly projected Reed into public life. During the Revolution he held a number of important military and political offices, such as confidential secretary to Washington, adjutant general of the Continental Army, and delegate to the last Pennsylvania provincial assembly, the Committee of Public Safety, and the Continental Congress. Beginning in 1778, he served as President of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. Required by the state constitution to step down from that position in October, 1781, Reed resumed his law practice and set about to realize his prewar ambition of securing the agency of the West Jersey Society.28


27 Reed to Society, Mar. 27, 1782, WJSR, TS 12/2.

28 Reed’s public career is covered in Roche.
Citing the death of Hunt, his own interest in the company, and the inability of the committee to appoint an agent in the regular fashion, Reed petitioned the legislatures of New Jersey and Pennsylvania to vest the agency in him. Arguments in his New Jersey petition included the "great Waste and Spoil of the Timber" on the Society's lands and the claim that Reed had paid out of his own pocket the taxes due on the company's properties. On several other occasions, Reed reiterated this claim, but his own accounts and other evidence do not support him. However, the promise made in his petition to pay all future taxes if appointed agent probably carried some weight with the lawmakers. Although the draft bill submitted by Reed was amended in the lower house, the New Jersey legislature generally and promptly obliged him in an enactment passed on October 5, 1781.

The law gave Reed powers identical to those Hunt had received from the committee. He had full authority to act for the Society, being prohibited only from sales of land or other acts permanently separating the company from its estate. The legislation specifically held Reed accountable to the Society for monies received and answerable for his management.

The enactment of October, 1781, was the first of three measures adopted in New Jersey respecting the wartime supervision of English-owned real estate, and Reed's success with the legislature probably resulted from the conformity of his proposal with a pattern soon to become general. In the following December, the legislature placed all lands owned by absentee British subjects under the supervision of public agents appointed in each county. This new legislation explicitly excluded the lands of the Society and specified that no alteration was intended in the powers earlier assigned to Reed. As in Reed's petition, the December enactment cited the need to guard property against waste and damage. A new element, however, was the desire to prevent profits and rents from "being conveyed to the Enemy." The county agents received powers

similar to those granted Reed, the principal difference being that they were required to turn over rents and other monies to the state treasurer.\footnote{30}

In June, 1782, the pattern of appointing agents acceptable to the legislature to superintend British-owned interests reappears in an act vesting in Robert Lettis Hooper the powers of agency over the affairs and estate of the American Iron Company, which held properties in Bergen and Morris Counties. Like John Hunt, the agent employed by the absentee British owners had died, leaving their affairs unattended.\footnote{31} Certainly exclusion from the general legislation benefitted the Society, the American Company, and their agents, since funds collected did not go to the state, except through the payment of taxes. However, all three acts constituted an endeavor by the New Jersey legislature to bring order to British-held interests and to place them in such a posture that some revenues would be provided the state by taxes or by appropriation of rents and other returns.

Because of his interest in Chester, Reed must have been disappointed at his inability to obtain legislation in Pennsylvania comparable to that secured in New Jersey. In part that failure resulted from factional strife between Pennsylvania Radicals and Republicans. An intensely bitter controversy soon enveloped Reed, charged by his Republican adversaries with having wavered in his attachment to the American cause in 1776 to the point of making overtures to the British for his possible defection. In addition to partisan opposition, Reed encountered the hostility of the Chester tenants, who filed a counterpetition, opposing the appointment of Reed as agent and recommending the forfeiture of the Society's title. Finally, the rationale presented by Reed in his petition for the agency was unconvincing in Pennsylvania. Reed cited his personal need to collect rents and other obligations from the Society's Chester tenants so that he might be reimbursed for money he

\footnote{30} "An Act for Taking Charge of and Leasing the Real Estate of the Subjects of the King of Great-Britain, lying within this State," Dec. 29, 1781, in Wilson, 259–261.

\footnote{31} "An Act to Vest Robert Lettis Hooper ... with Powers of Agency to take Charge of ... the American Iron Company ...," June 20, 1782, \textit{ibid.}, 271–272.
allegedly paid out in taxes in New Jersey. For several reasons then, Reed failed in Pennsylvania, but from October, 1781, until the summer of 1784, he was the legal manager of the Society's interests in New Jersey.

There are two somewhat separate aspects of Reed's activities as agent. One consists of his custodianship of the Society's estate during the first eighteen months of his agency. The second involves a resumption of his efforts, beginning in March, 1782, to realize his personal ambitions with respect to the Society. Surprisingly effective in eliminating much of the disorder surrounding the company's tracts in New Jersey, Reed also nearly succeeded in winning appointment as the company's regular agent and in becoming a purchaser of the Society's entire estate. His failure to attain these goals, especially the agency, embittered him greatly, and his last activity was a strange postscript in which he sought to create mutual antagonisms between the committee and the newly appointed agent, Robert Morris of New Jersey.

The most obvious problem facing Reed in October, 1781, was the occupation or use of the company's lands in New Jersey by numerous people acting inside, on the borders, or outside of the law. By advertisements and letters, Reed quickly publicized his appointment to the agency, warning all against injury to the company's interests. Local tax collectors received notification of Reed's promise to pay all future taxes and were cautioned against further sales or accepting money from squatters posing as legal tenants. Reed generally held that the sale of occupancy rights for nonpayment of taxes was unjustified and the law itself illegal. He closely checked each seizure and sale proceeding and discovered irregularities in the case of some 13,000 acres which enabled him to win a court suit against the purchasers. Other purchasers and claimants were also sued, unless they reached agreement with the agent whereby he bought out their interest or they became genuine tenants of the company. Some squatters having no claims or weak ones were evicted, their example prompting others to leave voluntarily. Sur-

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reptitious raids on the Society’s timber proved too great a problem even for the vigorous Reed. But he did what he could, employing many of the tactics earlier used by John Hunt.\textsuperscript{33}

Opposition to Reed’s program developed among those who had benefitted from the four-year interim between agents. James Butland, a subagent engaged by Reed, suffered physical abuse for his role in running a survey of a contested boundary. More important, protests were lodged in the state legislature against Reed’s activities, and pleas were made for the repeal of the act of October, 1781. Several petitions argued that the signers had informally agreed with earlier agents to purchase parcels of the Society’s lands. Anticipating these purchases, they had started improvements. Now, Reed demanded “heavy rents.” Moreover, the petitioners denied that Reed had paid taxes prior to October, 1781, such payments really having been made by the occupants. Finally, it was argued that, except for Reed himself, the Society consisted of subjects of Great Britain and thus were the “avowed and sworn enemies of this state.” Consequently, it was grievous that “the profits of said lands should now be taken from us and laid up in store for our Inveterate enemies.”\textsuperscript{34}

Reed later intimated that he defeated the purpose of these petitions by asking the legislature in June, 1782, for an enlargement of his powers as agent. The cause and effect relationship between Reed’s new request and the protests of the inhabitants cannot be clearly determined, but a standoff resulted. The upper house once again obliged Reed, but the lower chamber, upon deliberating the protests of the inhabitants, rejected Reed’s new proposal. No move

\textsuperscript{33} Advertisement by Reed, n.d., WJSR, TS 12/62, 89; Reed to Society, Mar. 1 and Mar. 27, 1782, loc. cit.; Reed to Butland, Oct. 27, 1781, Mar. 14, 1782, Feb. 28, 1783, Mar. 10, 1783, Morris Papers, Box 11; Reed to Jonas Hoffman, Dec. 7, 1781, Reed Letter Book, 146-149; Reed to William Smith, Dec. 8, 1781, ibid., 143-144; Reed to John Woodruff, John Dean, and Phillip Dean, Dec. 8, 1781, ibid., 144-145; Agreement Between Joseph Reed and Josiah Ball, Oct. 21, 1781, Morris Papers, Box 11; Memorandum of Agreement between Reed and Jeremiah and William Smith, Dec. 15, 1781, ibid.; Affidavit of James Butland, Mar. 16, 1786, ibid.

was made in either council or assembly to repeal the act of October, 1781, and Reed’s authority remained unchanged.\(^{35}\)

Given the unusual circumstances, Reed’s management of the Society’s affairs in New Jersey appears as an impressive performance. After his intervention, no further tax sales occurred. Occupants of the Society’s tracts had been identified and most of them forced to accept Reed’s terms or were driven off. At least the largest forays against the Society’s timber had been halted. By the spring of 1782, there could be no doubt that the company had a determined and able champion in America, and Reed’s timely intervention and forceful program had rescued the New Jersey lands from a critical situation.

His agency severely circumscribed by law and conditions prevailing during the closing years of the war, Reed looked to changes in the immediate future for the realization of several pre-war aims. Having seized the opportunity in 1781 to become the agent in New Jersey by an act of legislation, Reed wanted to be commissioned the Society’s regular agent when the war ended, with complete authority in Pennsylvania as well as New Jersey and free from the twenty-year-old ban on sales. He also resurrected his earlier desire to purchase the entire estate of the company. To accomplish these ends, Reed needed favorable action by the committee in London. Beginning in March, 1782, the main tool he used to shape the committee’s decisions were reports of conditions in America. These reports, sent directly by Reed or indirectly through DeBerdt, contained a repetitious theme, that the states of New Jersey and Pennsylvania were on the verge of confiscating the lands of British subjects. In the face of that threat, argued Reed, an immediate sale of the Society’s lands was imperative. Clearly, Reed intended to be one of the purchasers, although not until 1784 did he identify himself to the committee as a potential buyer. In 1782 and 1783, the brothers-in-law also suggested that the committee vest ample powers of agency in Reed, whose stature in America might guard the company against disaster.

In March, 1782, Reed sent the first of four letters to the committee. He urged sale of the “whole stock,” citing the decreasing

\(^{35}\) The assertion that Reed’s second proposal was in the nature of a counterpetition is found in his Account Current with the Society, July, 1784, Morris Papers, Box 9.
value of the Society's estate owing to the tax program, the destruction of timber, and the competition from cheap lands in the West. He also contended that American courts, now free from British "superintendance," would no longer recognize the Society as a joint stock company. But the main reason given for his advice of an immediate sale was the threat of loss of title through confiscatory programs. Reed stated he had discovered among the inhabitants on or near the Society's New Jersey tracts "a rooted, prevailing opinion... that cultivation of possessors have gained an interest which ought not to be disturbed by subjects of the state of the prince with whom this country is at open war." A similar mood existed among the Chester tenants. This popular sentiment received encouragement from "the example of Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas where the estates of British subjects have been confiscated and sold." That legislators in the Delaware Valley were not immune to the popular groundswell was evident, according to Reed, in a committee of the Pennsylvania Assembly, which "reported sequestration as a proper measure." He concluded that "there can be no doubt" that British subjects would be forced to sell their lands, to take actual possession, or to lose them by confiscation.36

Other signs of the imperilled state of the Society's property were subsequently transmitted to the committee by Reed or DeBerdt. Reed alleged that the Continental Congress favored confiscation of British lands, that the constitutions of Pennsylvania and New Jersey required an oath of allegiance to hold or transfer real estate, and that his inability to obtain an act in Pennsylvania making him agent resulted from the widespread support for "the idea of sequestrating lands and debts." Even in late 1784, after Reed had been to England and after promulgation of the terms of the peace treaty, he continued the same refrain: the repeal of the New Jersey act making him agent was evidence of the hostility toward British titles, and a statement of Governor Clinton of New York constituted yet another proof that confiscation would occur.37

Since Reed frequently failed to give particulars, such as dates,
not all of the evidence he cited can be checked for veracity. However, there are sufficient grounds for concluding that he deliberately misinformed the committee so as to frighten it into accepting his recommendations. For example, the New Jersey constitution of 1776 includes no requirement of an oath of allegiance to hold land. As for Pennsylvania, Reed specifically cited, but did not fully describe, the forty-second provision of the constitution of that state, dealing with the rights of "foreigners of good character who come to settle." This section stipulated that such persons, after taking an oath of allegiance, could "hold, acquire and transfer land or other real estate." Only by some stretching does this provision admit the Reed construction that absentee owners would have to sell their lands or come to the state and take actual possession. The repeal of the New Jersey act vesting the agency in Reed was accomplished in a bill which also repealed the general legislation placing British lands under public agents and the act appointing Hooper agent of the American Company. Receding the three acts would seem to indicate that the emergency had passed.

Reed may have accurately described other signs of imminent confiscation, such as the reports in the Continental Congress and the Pennsylvania Assembly. His best evidence was the adoption of confiscatory measures by the states in the South. Georgia, both Carolinas, Virginia and Maryland provided for the confiscation of lands of all or some bona fide British subjects residing in England. Even in Pennsylvania, the "Divesting Act," which placed the proprietary title of the Penn family in the commonwealth, was partially confiscatory, since the compensation given the Penns was only a fraction of the total value of the lands in question. However, Reed did not correctly report the sentiment among the legislators of Pennsylvania and New Jersey respecting British landholders such as the Society. To be sure, occupants of the Society's tracts in the two states did send petitions to the state governments favoring

39 Isaac Samuel Harrell, Loyalism in Virginia (Philadelphia, 1926), 87; Kenneth Coleman, The American Revolution in Georgia, 1763-1789 (Athens, 1958), 183; Robert O. DeMond, The Loyalists in North Carolina During the Revolution (Durham, 1940), 207; Charles Gregg Singer, South Carolina in the Confederation (Philadelphia, 1941), 104, 106; Philip A. Crowl, Maryland During and After the Revolution (Baltimore, 1943), 44-45.
elimination of the Society's title. But it should be remembered that the specific aim of these petitions had been to protest assigning care of the company's lands to Reed. Furthermore, tenants and occupants of other British-owned lands in New Jersey protested with equal fervor the appointment of public agents. Generally, tenants on lands belonging to absentees preferred the limbo which had resulted from the war. The only change they really favored was vesting title in themselves, not confiscation of the lands for the use of the state.\textsuperscript{40} Nowhere is there any indication that a majority of legislators were prepared to act upon this desire of the tenants, as Reed himself was aware.

Reed's reaction to the petition of the Chester tenants serves as an example of his facility in reversing himself when the occasion required. Writing to one of the Chester petitioners, he stated:

As to the confiscating of the lands of Persons who reside beyond the Sea and were never subjects of this state which is impudently suggested in yr petition, be assured no such thing is seriously thought of here [Philadelphia] nor ever will be. Consult any of yr members of the Assembly and you will soon be informed that they have no intention of that kind. . . .

On at least two other occasions, Reed contradicted the view he repeatedly expressed to the committee. In 1784, when in England, he sought to persuade several Americans also then in London to join him in a proposal to purchase the company's entire estate. Reed's correspondence with those parties described the Society's title as secure against all challenges. Also in his letters to Robert Morris, the new agent, Reed painted as dark and dismal a picture of the company's condition as he could, but he never mentioned the threat of confiscation, obviously because Morris was in a position to know that the threat was largely nonexistent.\textsuperscript{41}

Reed's own aspirations for the agency belie his predictions of calamity. In his earliest letters to the committee, he all but openly


\textsuperscript{41} Reed to an unidentified Chester tenant, Jan. 17, 1782, Reed Letter Book, 148–151; Reed to Jeremiah Wadsworth, Mar. 15, 1784, \textit{ibid.}, 174–175; Reed to William Bingham, Mar. 16, 1784, \textit{ibid.}, 176; Reed to Bingham, Mar. 21, 1784, \textit{ibid.}, 179–181; Reed to Morris, June 8, 1784, Reed MSS, XI.
solicited the appointment, and an explicit recommendation of Reed was made by DeBerdt to the committee. At one time, Reed indicated he would be satisfied merely with the agency in New Jersey, leaving someone else to handle affairs in Pennsylvania. That Reed should seek the agency or any part of it makes little sense if he really believed confiscation was almost certain.\footnote{42 Reed to DeBerdt, Apr. 2, 1782, loc. cit.; DeBerdt to Society, Feb. 17, 1783, WJSR, TS 12/2; Committee Minutes, Mar. 4, 1783, ibid., TS 12/17, 42.}

Not until the early spring of 1783 did the committee in London reactivate itself and begin to take action respecting the Society’s affairs in America. Although Reed concluded that the committee-men gave more weight to the views of American “refugees” in England than to his own opinions, decisions were made which accorded with Reed’s ambitions. In July, 1783, the committee decided to appoint two men to the agency, Thomas Fitzsimmons and Reed. However, a week later that decision was rescinded because of reports of “the confused State” of conditions in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and further action on the agency was postponed. This was as close as Reed ever came to being vested with powers of agency by the committee. In November, 1783, Reed traveled to England and often met with the committee-men. Doubtless the agency was discussed, but there is no record of it being offered to Reed. In May, 1784, the committee finally agreed to appoint Robert Morris to the agency.\footnote{43 Committee Minutes, July 29, ibid., 43; Committee Minutes, Aug. 5, 1783, ibid., 44. A rough draft of a commission to Reed was prepared, ibid., TS 12/64, 57–64. Committee Minutes, May 27, 1784, ibid., TS 12/17, 47.}

At that point, Reed’s desire for the agency may have been eclipsed by his enthusiasm for a purchase of the entire estate. This became a real possibility with the committee’s decision to entertain proposals for such a sale. For the first time, Reed emerged into the open as a prospective buyer, having aroused the interest and financial backing of William Bingham of Philadelphia. From May to July, 1784, occurred a series of discussions during which Bingham and Reed raised their offer from £6,000 to £9,500 sterling and the Society lowered its price from £11,200 to £10,500. Both parties stood by their last proposals and negotiations broke off.\footnote{44 In addition to approaching Bingham, Reed also sought to interest Jeremiah Wadsworth in making an offer to the Society. When Wadsworth replied that he was leaving for Ireland
Returning to America in October, 1784, Reed had little to show for his ten-month sojourn in England. His discovery of a revival of business conditions, particularly the good prospects for purveyors of land, led him to lament his refusal of the Society’s terms of sale. More striking was his anger and bitterness toward the committee because of its failure to extend him an offer of the agency, sentiments revealed in his letters and in an unsuccessful attempt to create mutual antagonism between the new agent and the committee.\(^45\) Ironically, Reed went to his grave in 1785 convinced that the Society had used him, despite his own efforts over a twelve-year period to advance himself at the expense of the company.

The American Revolution certainly wrought significant changes, but the experience of the West Jersey Society testifies to the quality of continuity. Despite revolution and war, the Society’s legal capabilities as a landholder in New Jersey and Pennsylvania remained unaltered, largely because of the moderate policies of the legislatures of the two new states. In 1787 the committee lifted the ban of 1761 and the sale of the Society’s lands resumed its erratic, uncertain pace with the committee once again developing suspicions of its agent. As earlier, the critical element for the Society continued to be the integrity of the American agent, and the company’s fortunes rose and fell according to the character and inclinations of its representative in America. Continuity on a personal level appears in the intriguing maneuvers of Joseph Reed. Reed’s ambitions respecting the Society showed a remarkable persistence throughout the period. The method by which Reed sought to sway the committee to his views was of the same character, if somewhat more clearly calcu-

\(^{45}\) Reed to DeBerdt, Oct. 30, 1784, Reed MSS, XI; Reed to Robert Morris, June 8, 1784, loc. cit.; Reed to Morris, Nov. 6, 1784, Morris Papers, Box 12; Reed to Society, June 10, 1784, loc. cit.; Reed to Anthony Merry, Nov. 9, 1784, loc. cit.; Reed to Butland, Oct. 25, 1784, Morris Papers, Box 11.
lated, as the failure of earlier agents to keep their employers well informed.

This is not to say that the Revolution did not prove costly to the Society. Many of the gains made by Hunt were nullified, and progress toward sale of all of the estate was probably retarded by some ten years. When the Society's lands again entered the market, they faced competition from new investment opportunities—American banks, public credit, and Loyalist and western lands. The Society had never profited from leasing its property and at war's end it found itself with scores of troublesome tenants in New Jersey as well as those on the hopelessly entangled Chester tract. Even the subsequent assistance of the legislature and the courts could extract no full payment of the Johnston debt. Others, such as James Parker and both Robert Morrices, gained from the confusion of the Society's affairs after the war, but this was an old story in the new setting of American independence. Throughout the eighteenth century—before, during and after the Revolution—the chief beneficiaries of the West Jersey Society's land operations were not shareholders in London, but various Americans, the agents and their cronies, clever provincial attorneys, astute fellow-proprietors, and ever active timber thieves.

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