The roster of individuals receiving honorary degrees from the College of New Jersey (Princeton) during the American Revolution includes several distinguished patriots. Figures such as Robert R. Livingston (A.M., 1780), Samuel Huntington (LLD, 1780), Thomas McKean (LLD, 1781) and Nathaniel Greene (A.M., 1781) are well known for the various services that they performed in the struggle for American independence.¹ Yet there are some men on this roster whose activities, while also of great value to the American cause, have not received similar historical recognition. Perhaps the most intriguing and memorable individual among these lesser-known recipients was the Reverend Dr. Thomas Wren.

The Reverend Mr. Wren was awarded the Doctor of Divinity degree at the Princeton commencement in September 1783. The citation after his name was simply worded: "Voted the Thanks of the Continental Congress in 1783 for services to American Prisoners

¹ General Catalogue of Princeton University, 1746-1906 (Princeton, 1908), 399-400. The author wishes to thank Loyola University for a summer research grant which enabled him to complete this article.
This brief reference did not indicate that Dr. Wren was in fact the first Englishman to receive an honorary degree from an American college since the outbreak of the American Revolution. Moreover, the award also failed to reveal anything of the career, character, or the actual contributions of this English clergyman for a nation that he had never seen.

Thomas Wren was born in the early autumn of 1725 in the village of Grange near Keswick in Cumberland County. The county, situated in the northwest corner of England, is part of the beautiful and picturesque Lake District which so deeply inspired the writings of William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, and Samuel Coleridge. Wren himself was also affected by the scenic surroundings of his youth, and often during his older years he undertook lengthy journeys to savor these resplendent vistas.

The family name Wren was quite common in Cumberland by the eighteenth century, though Thomas' ancestry has not been ascertained. However, it is known that his parents were Timothy and Judith Banks Wren who were married in the county on December 22, 1716. It is also known that both parents died while Thomas was receiving his early schooling and that the responsibility for completing his studies was entrusted to his elder brother Timothy.

The consummation of Thomas Wren's schooling lay in the Presbyterian ministry. Cumberland County had long been a center of Presbyterianism in England and the Wrens were evidently members of this dissenter sect. Thomas was given his elementary lessons in the Croswaithe parish school, then sent about twenty miles distant to St. Bee's, a prominent and well-established grammar school. From St. Bee's, Wren eventually went on to London, where in 1748 he entered a dissenting academy administered by Dr. Samuel

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2 Ibid., 400.
Morton Savage and the Reverend David Jennings. These dissenting academies had been founded principally to offer higher educational preparation for students planning to enter the ministry, and during much of the eighteenth century they reportedly provided "far better teaching" and had a "broader curriculum" than the existing English universities. The Jennings-Savage academy was particularly prominent for its advanced curriculum, and, after successfully completing the school's studies in 1753, Thomas Wren was admitted to the Presbyterian ministry.6

The Reverend Mr. Wren held several temporary posts until he obtained his permanent settlement. His first calling was as an assistant minister in Brentwood, Essex, and afterwards he moved to Colchester in the same county. After spending some time at various posts in Colchester, he preached for a year in the Norfolk village of Diss, and thereafter he "preached occasionally at Hampstead and at the Old Jury [Jewry] in London." Then, on June 10, 1755, the Reverend John Norman of Portsmouth was directed by his congregation to pay Wren "£5.5 for a trial period" as his assistant. Soon the post was made a permanent one.7

Wren's inability to obtain a permanent settlement sooner may have stemmed from both his apparent lack of inspiration and his questionable orthodoxy in the pulpit. These criticisms were indicated by a fellow cleric's description of him in Colchester:

He preached on 1st Jan. on a public occasion in which both congregations are concerned, and the poor creature that his prayer might be exact, as well as his preaching, he had it wrote down and read it to us, though not with the best of graces either. I stood at a distance and wondered at the close of every sentence his eyes were turned down to his cushion, but was informed afterwards by those that saw it that his prayer was wrote down. His sermon was not suitable to the occasion, nor yet to the criterion of the divine word. It was rank Arminianism...8

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8 Alfred Goodall, "Early Independency in Essex," The Congregational Historical Society, Transactions, VI (1913-1915), 156.
Notwithstanding such criticism, Wren remained secure in his Portsmouth post. Soon after his confirmation as assistant pastor, the ailing and elderly Mr. Norman died, and on January 9, 1757, Thomas Wren was ordained as minister of that Presbyterian church. The church was an impressive structure, especially for one in the region that serviced a dissenters congregation. The brick chapel, built in the "Dutch style of Architecture" had been completed at the upper end of High Street in 1718, and it was reportedly capable of seating nearly 700 communicants. It was set back from the street and was bordered by an iron fence.9

During the ensuing years Thomas Wren remained rather uninspiring as a preacher, though his knowledge and personal piety earned him considerable respect within his seaport parish. Although some of his contemporaries noted the continued lack of enthusiasm for Wren’s sermons, it was now laid in part to his north England speech patterns. Another contemporary wrote that although he often repeated "with great humor" stories he heard from English sailors, he was careful "that they were never interlarded with those vulgar and irreverent expressions so common among that brave and useful set of men."10 His exemplary personal conduct was his most noteworthy trait, and as one friend later wrote of him, "Few can be mentioned who have been more distinguished by piety and virtue, by purity of mind, and able behavior." Wren, who was a life-long bachelor, also performed numerous kindhearted acts within the city of Portsmouth which earned him the friendship and respect of the community’s established Anglican churchmen. His church records reveal that he helped raise money for Protestant colleges in America, and a number of charitable causes well beyond the bounds of his parish. Quite possibly these efforts on behalf of American dissenters, and the underprivileged, may have influenced his subsequent noteworthy assistance to the cause of American independence.

9 Henry and Julian Slight, Chronicles of Portsmouth (London, 1828), 91-92; William G. Gates, Illustrated History of Portsmouth (Portsmouth, 1906), 291–292, 297–298; Hutchinson, 224. High Street was one of the town's main streets and extended to the dockyard area. See The Portsmouth Guide or A Description of the Ancient and Present State of the Place (Portsmouth, 1775), 1–76.
In any event, Wren's liberal theological beliefs did carry over into politics; he supported freedom of elections, and, as a Cumberland freeholder, he became involved in that county's celebrated electoral contests in 1768 between Sir James Lowther and the Duke of Portland.\textsuperscript{11}

The approach of revolt in the colonies diverted considerable concern in England from domestic matters to imperial affairs. Portsmouth residents, living in a principal British naval port, became particularly aware of the escalating tensions in America. It is not unlikely that Wren and his fellow townsmen debated the course of events that led to the actual outbreak of hostilities.

In 1777 the consequences of the continuing colonial conflict were made more evident to the people of Portsmouth. On March 3 of that year Parliament empowered "His Majesty to secure and detain persons charged with or suspected of the crime of High Treason committed in any of his Majesty's colonies or Plantations or on the High Seas, or the crime of Piracy."\textsuperscript{12} The latter portion of this act applied to captured rebel sailors, many of whom were then confined on guardships in English ports. Accordingly, by the end of May 1777 two special prisons were prepared to hold apprehended American seamen. One of the jails, Mill Prison, was situated in Plymouth, while the other, Forton Prison, was located across Portsmouth Harbor near the hamlet of Gosport.\textsuperscript{13}

Forton, which had already served as a prison during the Seven Years War, boasted rather substantial facilities. It had been built


as a hospital in the reign of Queen Anne, and consisted of two spacious buildings that reportedly could hold up to 2,000 inmates. During the American Revolution one building was used for "under [junior] officers [and] sailors," and one for higher officers. There was one airing ground between the buildings and another nearby "on three-quarters of an acre of level ground." In December 1777 the Admiralty approved the construction of a shed on the airing ground which was open on all sides and under which seats were placed for the prisoners to sit during hot or sultry weather. Surrounding the prison area were eight-foot-high iron pickets driven into the ground about two inches apart. The prison itself was staffed by a keeper (agent), his clerk, three turnkeys, a steward, a doctor, cooks, laborers and a varying number of military guards. On June 13, 1777, the first American seamen were confined there and by November 1782 a total of more than 1,200 captured rebels had been listed on Forton's rosters.

The American prisoners usually passed through Portsmouth on their way to Forton. While in the seaport they were examined by civil magistrates and sometimes by naval officials. The standard procedure of the magistrates’ examination was to determine that the captives were Americans who had served on board armed vessels, and thereafter to issue warrants charging them with treason and committing them to Forton "as Rebels and Pirates." Despite the ominous tone of this warrant, most of the prisoners experienced little mistreatment during their hearings, and several of them even displayed relief upon being sent to this land-based prison. Jonathan Carpenter, one of Forton's first inmates, "rejoiced" at the prospect of being transferred from his guardship to Forton, while Caleb Foot, a later detainee, declared that leaving his prison ship for

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Forton "was like coming out of Hell and going into Paradise." Forton, however, was not intended to be a Paradise, and following their examinations, the captured mariners were usually marched "under heavy guard" the two miles from Portsmouth to the prison.16

Prison conditions were far from ideal for the first American inmates during 1777. Timothy Connor, one of the earliest, noted that for a day after he and his shipmates arrived on June 13 they "had nothing to eat but boiled cabbage which was part of the officers' allowance." The supply of provisions eventually improved, but the quality and quantity of food continued to be the subject of intermittent prisoner complaints. Clothing was another shortcoming; many of the early arrivals had had their possessions taken during their shipboard captivity, and some captives reportedly arrived at Forton half-naked. Nonetheless, it was not until November 1777 that the supervisors of British naval prisons, known as the Commission of Sick and Hurt Seamen, petitioned the Admiralty to alleviate the "great want of clothing and of Shoes and Stockings amongst many of the prisoners."17 The prison's administrative regulations, while not overly abusive, also sparked resentments from the initial groups of inmates. Forton's officials, who were to enforce these rules, were frequently guilty of acts of corruption, petty restrictions, unwarranted harassments, and in August 1777 an inmate alleged that John Newsham, the prison agent, forced three newly arrived naval officers to "deliver up their money by the point of the bayonet."18

Beyond these physical shortcomings at Forton, captivity within

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its gates also induced the psychological drawbacks of boredom, isolation, tedium and frustration. Part of a song written by one of the American prisoners reflected these moods:

O now the cold winter comes on
And Forton runs hard by my side
For to work at my trade I have none
And the best of my friends I have tried
O he thats a friend to himself
Will provide for a cold winters day
That will serve him in time of his need
When the best of his friends are all floon.19

The residents of Portsmouth were quite aware of these incoming American prisoners. The Yankee captives were frequently observed disembarking at the Royal Naval docks and subsequently marching from the town to Forton. For some of Portsmouth's inhabitants these colonial rebels were the object of scorn while for others they were a matter of curiosity. (Several of the residents in this latter category occasionally visited the prison site merely to gaze at these New World captives).20 However, for some of the seaport inhabitants, such as the Reverend Thomas Wren, these prisoners soon became the object of sympathy and compassion.

Wren was particularly prompt in coming to the aid of the captured rebels. Following the initial confinement of Americans, the Portsmouth minister began making regular visits to the prison. It was evidently on one of these early calls that he became acquainted with officers from the ship Rising States, and gave them cash in exchange for their continental notes. Apparently this was the first form of financial assistance that agent Newsham permitted these imprisoned rebels.21 The Reverend Mr. Wren also appeared at the commitment hearings for captured American sailors during the latter part of 1777, and, after repeated entreaties to authorities, he was finally allowed to distribute small sums of money to those

21 John Thornton to American Commissioners at Paris, Jan. 5-8, 1778, Am 811.3, Harvard University Library.
captives in special confinement. Concurrently, he became particularly active in soliciting financial contributions through local friends and organizations, as well as donations of clothing.22

By the end of 1777, sympathetic individuals from outside the Portsmouth area had bolstered Wren's efforts for prisoner relief. One such person was Thomas Digges, the son of a prominent Maryland landowner who had been working in the London mercantile trade for several years past. Digges had learned of the privations and shortcomings facing the growing number of Americans at both Mill and Forton prisons, and in November 1777 he described their plight in a letter to Arthur Lee, one of the American Commissioners in Paris. Early the following month Digges received an authorization from Lee to spend £50 for the prisoners' needs.23 Meanwhile, Digges' concern over the alleged maltreatment of these captives was shared by several prominent antiwar Englishmen, including Lord Abingdon who called for an investigation of prison conditions during a parliamentary speech on December 11. Abingdon also announced his intention to seek a subscription for prisoner relief from his fellow members of the House of Lords. This peer's pronouncement may have provided the needed impetus of respectability, for on the day before Christmas in 1777 more than 100 persons met at the King's Arms Tavern in Cornhill "for the Purpose of relieving the Distresses of the American Prisoners." The gathering resulted in pledges of about £1,500 to a subscription for prisoner aid, and the selection of a twenty-man committee to administer this fund. Fifteen days later the committee, which included Thomas Digges, four members of Parliament, and four London aldermen, announced that the pledges had increased to over £3,700.24

Implementation of this subscription drive gave additional prominence to Thomas Wren's endeavors, while simultaneously word of his activities at Forton was being sent to the American Commissioners in Paris. This information was conveyed in a letter dated January 5-8, 1778, from Major John Thornton, who had previously been dispatched by the Commissioners to investigate conditions at both Mill and Forton. Thornton's letter reported that Wren's activities were about the only heartening aspects of an otherwise dismal situation. According to Major Thornton, Wren had been "of the greatest service and behaved with great Humanity to the American prisoners." He noted in particular that "this worthy clergyman" had visited the Americans at Forton every other day, supplied them "from time to time with trifling [sic] sums," and had even gotten provisions delivered to inmates confined in the special punishment compound known as "the black hole." 25 Thornton's letter also declared that he had asked Wren to check an arrangement with Mrs. Elizabeth Harrison, Forton's chief cook, to provide officers "with a joint of meat" every other day. The major concluded by stating that the public announcement of the subscription for the American prisoners had already produced several sympathetic inquiries and pledges, and he indicated that many more donations would soon follow. In fact, a few days after this letter was completed, it was announced that the subscription was closing after reaching the impressive sum of £3,815 17s 10d. 26

The success of this subscription enlarged the tasks of those who directly engaged in assisting the American prisoners. At Forton, where administrative rule was now becoming more benevolent, Thomas Wren began a regular distribution of his portion of the

25 American Commissioners to Maj. [John] Thornton, Dec. 11, 1777, in Albert H. Smyth, ed., The Writings of Benjamin Franklin (New York, 1906), VII, 75–76; Thornton to American Commissioners, Jan. 5-6, 1778, Harvard. Major John Thornton, who was Arthur Lee's secretary and also did errands for Benjamin Franklin, has been accused of questionable loyalty to the Patriot cause. See John Thornton to Benjamin Franklin, Oct. 4, 1777, Franklin Papers, American Philosophical Society (APS); Lewis Einstein, Divided Loyalties: Americans in England During the War of Independence (London, 1933), 45; Prelinger, "Franklin and the American Prisoners of War," 266.

26 Thornton to American Commissioners, Jan. 5-8, 1778, Harvard; Gentleman's Magazine, XLVIII (1778), 43; The Public Advertiser, Jan. 10, 1778; Clark, "In Defense of Thomas Digges," 390; Anderson, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in Britain," 81n. The London Evening Post, Jan. 13-15, 1778, reported that the amount of the subscription totaled £4,657.
bounties that had been collected. Individual allotments for the period from February 1778 through June 1779 apparently averaged about 1s 2d per week for common sailors and double this sum for officers.27 From June 1779 through early 1781 all of the prisoners received continually decreasing assistance from a second, less bountiful, subscription fund. Food rations, especially meat, generally improved in both quantity and quality. Wren and his assistant, Mr. Duckett, also distributed warm clothing to alleviate the effects of the damp, chilly winter, as well as dispensing personal items such as tobacco, medicines, books, tea and writing supplies to inmates who often lacked funds for purchasing them at the prison market.28

Meanwhile, working from France, the American Commissioners were becoming more involved in the relief activities of sympathetic Britons. In October 1777, Benjamin Franklin had written to David Hartley, an old friend and an antiwar member of Parliament, requesting that he distribute two or three hundred pounds to needy American captives. On February 3, 1778, Hartley informed Franklin of the work accomplished by the prisoner relief committee and noted that, according to the doctor’s wishes, he had recently advanced Mr. Wren, “a very worthy man,” £50 in order to provide special dinners for the officers at Forton. Furthermore, he declared that if Franklin would send him an additional £100 this supplemental meal program could be extended for another eight to ten weeks.29

Nine days later Dr. Franklin replied to Hartley thanking him for so “readily engaging in the means of relieving our poor captives, and the pains you have taken and the advances you have made for that purpose.” He enclosed the £100 that Hartley had requested and added, “I much approve of Mr. Wren’s prudent as well as benevolent conduct in the Disposition of the Money; and wish him to continue doing what shall appear to him and you to be right,

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which I am persuaded will appear the same to me and my colleagues here. I beg you will present him, when you write him my respectful acknowledgements. . . .”

Franklin’s compliments, and more importantly his remittance, were gratefully received by Wren, who was then hard pressed to maintain the supplemental officers’ messes. On February 7, 1778, he had written to David Hartley that Mrs. Harrison’s “patience and credit are near exhausted,” and that her husband had advised her to stop making these supplemental food purchases. Wren had promised to pay her £10 10s the following Monday which should provide Hartley with more time to obtain funds. Seventeen days later Franklin’s payment at last arrived and Wren modestly replied to commendations from the American Commissioners: “The regards and acknowledgements of such persons form the most ample recompense that my imagination can reach.”

Soon afterwards it became necessary to modify this special food program. On March 25, 1778, Wren wrote directly to Franklin asking permission to draw from the remainder of the £100 remittance in order to reimburse Mrs. Harrison. He also noted that he had advised the American officers of the limited funds available for continuing their supplemental messes, and the consequent need for frugality. In response to this assessment, the officers had decided that instead of paying the higher costs of food preparation they would rather receive weekly cash allotments, “and so to manage the sum granted as to make it go as far as possible.” Thus, by the beginning of April Wren was dispensing an additional three shillings a week to the officers at Forton, and reporting his expenditures to Hartley. Once again financial problems emerged, and on May 13, 1778, Wren wrote to Hartley that he was sorely “in want of more cash,” and had been obliged to use £21 of his own money. Although he might obtain some funds from Sir John Carter, a parishioner and former mayor of Portsmouth, the ultimate needs would have to be met by contributions from sources in London and France. His

31 Wren to Hartley, Feb. 7, 1778, Franklin Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP); Wren to Hartley, Mar. 5, 1778, ibid.; Statement of Thomas and Elizabeth Harrison, Mar. 17, 1778, HSP.
32 Wren to Franklin, Mar. 25, 1778, Franklin Papers, II, 10, University of Pennsylvania.
appeals were eventually answered and most of the special food and regular monetary grants continued with occasional interruptions, and lesser amounts, throughout the remainder of the war.  

Financial assistance, while the most prominent, was not the only way in which the Reverend Mr. Wren brought aid to the Americans at Forton. He consistently strove to provide them with needed items such as medicine and clothing, often using his own limited income. One prisoner wrote that when subscriptions were temporarily depleted, the minister "used to go round the neighborhoods to beg clothing and money for us." Within Forton's confines Wren endeavored to alleviate the monotony and frustrations of prison life. He offered spiritual comfort to prisoners; he encouraged the organization of regular schooling in reading, writing, navigation and arithmetic; and, most importantly, he became a source of reports, messages, and news from the outside world. Usually, Wren had no difficulty in bringing such information to the eager prisoners, although in November 1778 he complained that Keeper Newsham, citing Admiralty orders, had forbidden him to deliver a letter to the American officers from the Commissioners in Paris. After some discussion, however, Wren was allowed to transmit verbally the contents of this letter to the anxious inmates.

Several prisoners at Forton kept accounts of their captivity in which they noted the charitable work of their Portsmouth benefactor. Mention was made of the assistance given by Thomas Wren

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35 Wren to Hartley, Nov. 19, 1778, D/EHy 040, Hartley-Russell Papers; Barnes, Memoirs of Nathaniel Fanning, 15; Alexander, "Forton Prison," 373-375; Prelinger, "Franklin and the American Prisoners of War," 268. The letter which Wren was not allowed to deliver to the officers was sent by the American Commissioners on Sept. 19, 1778. It mentioned negotiations on a possible prisoner exchange, the matter of escapes, and requested information on the allowances they were receiving. American Commissioners to the American Prisoners at Forton, Plymouth, Sept. 19, 1778, Forton Prison, Prisoner of War Papers, 1777-1779, Accession No. 16,512, Library of Congress; Prelinger, "Franklin and the American Prisoners of War," 2742s.
in the narratives of inmates such as Charles Bulkeley and Elisha Hinman of Connecticut and Luke Matthewman of New York.36 More detailed descriptions of Wren's work appeared in the lengthier journals of Nathaniel Fanning, Jonathan Carpenter, George Thompson and Timothy Connor. Fanning recalled with particular gratitude Wren's regular visits to dispense money, supplies, and wartime information. He also stated that whenever any disgruntled prisoners would berate the minister for not meeting all their demands, Wren would answer soothingly, "have a little patience my children, and I will endeavor to bring you the next time I come whatever you are in need of." Timothy Connor, who was confined in Forton from June 1777 until his exchange two years later, kept the most extensive prison diary. Connor not only cited the clergyman's welcomed distribution of supplies and subscription monies, but he also emphasized the optimistic manner in which Wren kept alive the inmates' hopes for eventual repatriation.37

Exchange agreements were the principal avenues through which the prisoners sought an authorized release from their English prisons. During the Revolution captured Americans were continually offered an opportunity for pardon by entering His Majesty's service, but relatively few of them chose such defection in order to obtain their freedom. Instead, most of the captives at Forton and Mill prisons remained loyal to their country's cause, and looked to their Commissioners in France for their ultimate release from confinement.38

37 "Diary of George Thompson of Newburyport, kept at Forton Prison, England, 1777-1781," Essex Institute Historical Collections, LXXVI (1940), 221-242; Barnes, Memoirs of Nathaniel Fanning, 19; Journal of Jonathan Carpenter, Vermont Historical Society; Connor Journal, XXX, 32; Fanning's journal is particularly noted for its anti-British bias.
38 Lemisch, "Listening to the Inarticulate," 14-18; Alexander, "Forton Prison," 384-385; Anderson, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in Britain," 71-72. Lemisch (p. 17) states that the "overall defection rate in Forton and Mill Prison was between seven and eight percent." Alexander (p. 384) using Timothy Connor's Journal cites the figure for Forton at "5.7" percent for the period 1777-1779. Anderson (p. 72n) claims that "a high proportion" of the defectors were old countrymen."
Obtaining these general prisoner exchanges proved to be drawn out, contentious, and haphazard affairs. In February 1777, Benjamin Franklin’s initial overtures to British officials had met with intransigence, but by early 1778 renewed efforts at colonial reconciliation and France’s entry into the war had made England more receptive to such an exchange. Nonetheless, negotiations between Franklin and English officials dragged on throughout 1778, with both sides blaming the other for delays. The matter was further complicated by the fact that Franklin had to reconcile his efforts with his French allies. Nevertheless, in December 1778 the British finally agreed to an exchange procedure, and the following March 100 Americans were sent to France from Mill Prison. In June 1779, 119 Americans followed them from Forton, reportedly “receiving the joy & gifts of the people as they passed through Gosport.”

England had insisted that these captives were to be exchanged only for British prisoners in France in units of one hundred, and because Franklin lacked prisoners to exchange the next transfer of Americans did not occur until March 1780. Problems resulted anew from this exchange so that the further release of Americans was halted until March 1782 when Parliament acknowledged that captured Americans were in fact prisoners of war. The following month the Admiralty ordered all of these captives sent to North America for exchange and by July 1782 more than 1,000 American prisoners had left for home.

Thomas Wren had found himself involved in the delicate maneuvering that preceded the initial prisoner transfers. In early 1778, the Americans at Forton had drawn up petitions to the Lords of the Admiralty requesting exchange. The petitions were sent to David Hartley with the expectation that he would use his political influence on their behalf. Wren himself wrote to Hartley on March 19, 1778, endorsing the prisoners’ aspirations: “I trust sir that you will give these petitions such direction and weight that these poor men may soon see their native country.” Two months later, as the

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captives' hopes increased, he wrote to Hartley again asking if he had any "intelligence respecting their exchange." When no positive word arrived during the summer of 1778, the Americans became more restive, and at their insistence Wren again pressed Hartley for information. At last on November 4, 1778, Hartley sent Wren a letter, along with one from the Commissioners in Paris, which indicated that a transfer agreement was imminent. Two weeks later Wren informed Hartley that he had passed on the good news to the Americans, and he now expected that "the Exchange of Prisoners will speedily take place." In fact, it was not effected for another seven months, during which time Wren was often obliged to mollify the cynicism and bitterness of the inmates.

Support for exchange agreements was not the only way in which Thomas Wren assisted American prisoners in attaining their freedom from Forton. Although it was little known in England during the Revolution, the Portsmouth parson had a hand in abetting several of the successful escapes from the prison.

Attempted escapes from Forton occurred almost simultaneously with the initial confinement of Americans. Timothy Connor reported in his journal that on June 19, 1777, "our people made a large hole through the wall of the prison, and eleven men made their escape." During the ensuing two years of his captivity, Connor estimated that 112 out of 415 Americans had broken out of Forton, and British records from June 1777 through April 1782 listed 536 attempted escapes. These included individual flights, as well as mass break outs. The prisoners dug tunnels (including one from the prison privy); they jumped the eight foot prison pickets; they assumed disguises and stole keys to the prison gates; and they bribed

42 Wren to Hartley, Nov. 19, 1778, D/EHy 040, Hartley-Russell Papers; Prelinger, "Franklin and the American Prisoners of War," 274-276; Barnes, Memoirs of Nathaniel Fanning, 19; Connor Journal, XXXII, 280-284. The letter from the American Commissioners in Paris, which Hartley enclosed in his November 4 letter to Wren, was the one which keeper Newsham had not allowed Wren to deliver to the American officers. See note 35.
the frequently corrupt and incompetent guards. Punishment for recaptured fugitives, forty days in the black hole at half rations, was apparently not too serious a deterrent. Furthermore, Forton itself was less secure than Mill Prison, and guards at both facilities had no orders to fire on fleeing inmates so that escape must have seemed more attractive to many of the prisoners than a frustrating and tedious wait for exchange.\footnote{Thomas C. Parramore, "The Great Escape from Forten Gaol: An Incident of the Revolution," \textit{North Carolina Historical Review}, XLV (1968), 350–356; \textit{The Annual Register for the Year 1778}, 200; Anderson, "American Escapes from British Naval Prisons," 238–239; Alexander, "Forton Prison," 381–383; Kaminkow, \textit{Mariners of the Amer. Rev.}, xiv–xv; Bowman, \textit{Captive Americans}, 56–57.}

Despite these inviting circumstances, escape from Forton and from England was not without difficulty. Inside the prison there were informers who warned the Keeper of inmates' plans. Outside the picket gates were local civilians called "five pounders," who were awarded that sum for returning any of the escapees. Some prisoners actually worked in collusion with these civilians for a free evening outside Forton plus a little extra spending money for themselves, and those captives who were making determined attempts to flee England had to be concerned about such men and their tracking dogs.\footnote{Alexander, "Forton Prison," 382–384; Luke Matthewman "Narrative," 182; "Diary of George Thompson," 225; Barnes, \textit{Memoirs of Nathaniel Fanning}, 10; Lemisch, "Listening to the Inarticulate," 19.} Additionally, American prisoners who wished to get out of the country were often hampered by a lack of knowledge of secure travel routes, and needed suitable clothing, money, and identification papers.

Many of these American escapees were recaptured before they reached safety, but among those who were successful several owed their freedom to Thomas Wren and his associates. It was Wren's parsonage on High Street that often served as a first stop on the freedom trip for those who were able to slip out of Forton and evade the avaricious "five pounders." There, Wren, assisted by sympathetic townsmen, offered sanctuary to these fugitives while also providing the necessary means of travel to London, seventy-five miles distant. In London, the escapees almost invariably went to Wren's friend Thomas Digges, who lived at No. 23 Villars Street, Strand. At Digges' home, and sometimes at the residence of Dr.
George Williams, another sympathizer, Americans from both Forton and Mill were concealed until they received the money and the means for transportation to the continent. By June 1782, Digges claimed to have aided more than 160 escapees. However, this assertion, as well as Digges' earlier claim that the burden of aiding these fugitives had put him in "extreem" financial difficulties, was somewhat exaggerated.46

Thomas Wren himself made no existent professions concerning his role in abetting these flights, but his actions were noted by others. John Thornton, in his letter to the American Commissioners in January 1778, wrote that in addition to his benevolences for the American prisoners Mr. Wren had been "providing some with the means of making their escapes." Later, in November 1780, Thomas Digges wrote to Franklin that "numbers have reduced lately owing to the exertions of a very worthy little agent; numbers having found their way to a certain house in Amster[da]m."47 Successful escapees also wrote of Wren's assistance. Captain Elisha Hinman mentioned Wren's help after he had bribed his way out of the prison. Seaman George Thompson noted that after he and another inmate had made their escapes from Forton, Wren had provided them with a safe hideaway and additional clothing until a way out of England was arranged. Lieutenant Luke Matthewman reported that after he and Captain John Smith had tunnelled their way to freedom in late 1780, they "went to Portsmouth where we received instructions from our good friend Dr. Wren how to proceed." Lieutenant Nathaniel Fanning was not an escapee, but in 1783 he too described the "extra-legal" assistance offered by Wren. Fanning appropriately commented that such assistance "ought to be universally known in the United States."48

46 Alexander, "Forton Prison," 383; Clark, "In Defense of Thomas Digges," 405–406, 428; Dr. George Williams to Franklin, Oct. 2, 1778, Franklin Papers, APS; [Thomas Digges] to Franklin, Nov. 10, 1779, Franklin Papers, HSP.

47 Thornton to American Commissioners, Jan. 5–8, 1778, Harvard; Thomas Digges to Franklin, Nov. 13, 1780, Franklin Papers, HSP; Clark, "In Defense of Thomas Digges," 421.

Indeed, with the close of the American Revolution, action was taken to give some recognition to Wren’s various endeavors. In February 1780 a letter from Benjamin Franklin to the Portsmouth clergyman offered an early indication of American gratitude:

Reverend Sir:

Your great attention to the wants of our poor captive countrymen and your kind and charitable care of them in their sicknesses and other distresses I have often heard spoken of by such as have escaped and passed through this place, in the strongest terms of grateful acknowledgement. I beg you accept among the rest, my sincere and hearty thanks, and my best wishes for your health and prosperity.

Later, on July 22, 1783, Franklin cited Wren’s contributions in a letter to Robert R. Livingston, head of the Confederation Congress’ Department of Foreign Affairs, and added: “I wish the Congress would enable me to make a present and that some of our universities would confer upon him the degree of Doctor.”

The following September 25, three weeks after the signing of the Peace of Paris, a congressional resolution was initiated to thank Wren and award him a gift of £500. Apparently Congress had second thoughts about the financial gift; for the approved resolution of September 29 merely voted that “the thanks of Congress be given to the reverend Doctor Wren for his humane and benevolent attention to the citizens of these United States who were prisoners at Portsmouth in Great Britain during the war.”

A few weeks after this laudatory congressional resolve, Thomas Wren was sent word of the second honor that Franklin had suggested to Livingston. Contact had been made with Elias Boudinot, President of the Confederation Congress, and a trustee of the College of New Jersey. Boudinot evidently had little difficulty


persuading this Presbyterian College to award a Presbyterian minister a degree, especially with the added endorsements of Franklin and Livingston. Thus, on November 1, 1783, Boudinot wrote to Franklin informing him of Princeton’s award of an honorary doctorate. Boudinot also included a copy of the diploma and a letter written to the “Rev’d Dr. Wren” mentioning his acts of “Benevolence and Humanity” to the American prisoners and concluding: “It adds Sir to my happiness on this Occasion to enclose a Diploma from the University in this Place of which I have the honor of being a trustee conferring on you the Degree of Doctor of Divinity which I hope you will favor us with the acceptance of as an additional Evidence of the respect of this grateful country.”

On December 10, 1783, Franklin sent Congress’ resolution of thanks, the College of New Jersey’s diploma, and Boudinot’s letter to Thomas Wren by way of a mutual friend, Dr. William Hodgson of London. Hodgson had served on the prisoner relief committee and had assisted Franklin in arranging exchanges of wartime captives. Two months later Dr. Wren replied to Boudinot in a modest and gracious manner:

Portsmouth, 12th February 1784

Honorable Sir,

I have had the honour to receive your very obliging letter of the 1st of November last, which enclosed a Vote of thanks of the Honourable the Congress of the United States of America, and a Diploma of Doctor in Divinity from the College of New Jersey.

The sentiments which you are pleased to express on this occasion assure me Sir, that I may take the liberty to request, that you will present to the Honourable Congress, in a better manner than I am able to do my most grateful acknowledgements for the distinguished honour they have done me. I receive this testimony of their approbation with the highest sense of their condescending and generous regards. It is the pure result of their own goodness; For tho’ I was determined to do everything in my power for the relief of their captives, yet were not my efforts equal to my wishes. All possible assistance to men suffering so deeply, and in such a cause, appeared to me, to be in the strictest sense, my duty. And as the

51 Elias Boudinot to Franklin, Nov. 1, 1783, Franklin Papers, APS; Boudinot to Wren, Nov. 1, 1783, in Burnett, VII, 362-363.
52 Franklin to William Hodgson, Dec. 10, 1783, in Smyth, IX, 124; The Public Advertiser, Jan. 2, 1778; Sparks, VIII, 415; Dictionary of National Biography, XXVII, 72.
impulse of that humanity which I feel, the attachment to that liberty which I adore and the desire of succoring oppressed innocence, never obtained full gratification. I am the more affected with the acknowledgement of that Honourable body over which you preside. Their Vote of thanks to me, also acquires additional value, as it is the Act of men who had spirit equal to the defense of their rights, and perseverance sufficient for the emancipation of their country. Such honours no other men can confer. Such honours no other men possess.

I pray the favour of you Sir to convey the enclosed to the President of the College of Princeton. And permit me Sir to add that I esteem myself greatly obliged by the polite and friendly manner in which you have communicated to me these high and undeserved regards of your country.

May your country, Sir be the Seat of freedom, the region of virtue and prosperity, and the asylum of the oppressed for ever.

With Sincere respect and esteem
I have the honour to be
Honourable Sir
Your very obliged and humble Servant
Thomas Wren

Thomas Wren never saw the small New Jersey college which awarded him this honorary doctorate. Following the end of the American Revolution he continued to preach at the High Street Chapel. He also maintained a correspondence with some of those individuals in England who had helped him with prisoner relief, and he evidently maintained some contacts with a few of the former American captives. The closing of Forton as a wartime prison had ended Wren's humanitarian efforts there, but, as indicated in his Church's records, he continued to work for charitable causes in England. As a result of these altruistic acts, he became known as "the John Howard of his neighborhood." He also continued to spend his vacations on trips northward to the beautiful Lake Country of his youth. There he was also respected for his amiability and knowledge, and he was even invited to settle as a minister in Keswick. Wren, however,

53 Wren to Elias Boudinot, Feb. 12, 1783, Princeton University Archives.
54 Records of Pounds Memorial Church, CHU 82/9, 82/10; An indication of Wren's continued correspondence with former captives can be found in his letter to Franklin on Dec. 5, 1782, Franklin Papers, APS. John Boylston, an expatriate Bostonian who lived in England during the Revolution, had contributed to Wren's prisoner relief appeals and continued to correspond with the minister after the war. See Charles W. Parsons, "Zabdiel and John Boylston," New England Historical and Genealogical Register, XXXV (1881), 150-152.
declined the offer and returned to his Portsmouth Chapel where he continued to preach until his death, “after an illness of a few days,” on October 30, 1787.56

Among the individuals in England who openly supported the Patriot cause during the American Revolution, the Reverend Dr. Wren was rather unique. Men such as Charles Fox, William Pitt, Lord Abingdon, and Edmund Burke openly orated against the war, but these men did not take their opposition to the hostilities to the point of treason as the Portsmouth minister had done. (Assistance to escaped prisoners of war was, of course, quite illegal.) Additionally, while several individuals in England such as Thomas Digges, William Hartley, and Thomas Hodgson had joined Wren in gathering subscriptions for American captives, Thomas Wren, unlike Digges, was not accused of pocketing prisoner relief funds.56 In fact, the records reveal that Wren was never reimbursed for some of the monies which he had provided from his own limited livelihood.

Wren’s motives for his altruistic acts appear to have been both political and ethical according to his letter to Elias Boudinot. In it, he indicated a strong sympathy for the ideals of the American Revolution as well as a magnanimous concern for the prisoners at Forton. He might also have been impelled into his obviously courageous involvement with enemy prisoners by a strong sectarian empathy for the captives, most of whom were fellow dissenters from the Anglican faith. Humanitarian adages from the scriptures might also have influenced the changes from his rather dull, unspectacular, pre-Revolutionary posture. And a final insight into his supportive and effective actions might also be garnered from a chapel monument.

55 Gates, Illustrated Hist. of Portsmouth, 298; Records of Pounds Mem. Church, CHU 82/9, 82/10; Hutchinson, 225; Gentleman’s Magazine, LVII, pt. 2, 1026–1027.

erected at his congregation's expense shortly after his burial. The monument, which was destroyed by German bombs in World War II, carried an inscription that perhaps best reflected the measure of the man:

Thomas Wren DD  
Born at Keswick, 
In the County of Cumberland: 
Died October the 30th 1787: aged 63 years 
Distinguished for sound judgement, 
Useful learning, and unaffected piety: 
He was no less eminent 
For the peculiar virtues of the Christian profession, 
Meekness of spirit, gentleness of manner, 
And an active and universal benevolence.57

Loyola University of Chicago  
SHELDON S. COHEN