

# David Swain edits new edition of Revolutionary War prison ship memoir

by June Portnoy

The David Library of the American Revolution in Washington Crossing recently celebrated the publication of "Recollections of Life on the Prison Ship Jersey" by Thomas Dring, edited by Newtown resident David Swain, a volunteer research assistant at the library.

David began working on this book 40 years ago in 1971 while working as a paid researcher at the Rhode Island Historical Society.

The Historical Society had received a Bicentennial grant to review and publish Revolutionary War manu-

scripts of historical significance.

David was assigned to research Dring's 79-page memoir written in 1824.

Dring was a seaman by trade who had chosen privateering as his contribution to the American Revolution.

These privateer ships captured enemy ships and their cargoes. This left the navy free for direct combat with the enemy's navy.

During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress authorized privateering as legal by being licensed with an official "letter of marque and reprisal."

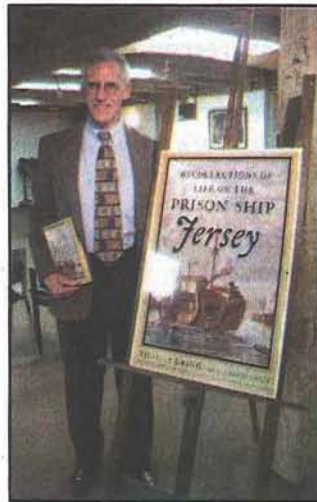
In 1782 Dring's privateer

ship was captured by the British and he was taken prisoner on the infamous British ship, the Jersey.

He was one of few prisoners aboard this ship who lived to tell his story.

At age 65, 40 years after being held prisoner on the Jersey, he described his firsthand experience of being imprisoned on the ship.

Dring wrote a lengthy, detailed and impassioned manuscript describing in graphic detail the filth, uncontrollable disease, food and water deprivation, rodents, and the cramped and unsanitary conditions causing the death of many prisoners.



David Swain

He described the intentional cruel atrocities committed by men against men. He specifically blamed those who directly caused his suffering, such as the British guards.

Dring also expressed anger at his fellow countrymen and the Continental Congress who neglected American inmates on prison ships.

This was a time when prisoners were supposed to be treated more humanely; before the Revolutionary War most prisoners of war were slaughtered or enslaved.

However, Dring wrote how treatment aboard the Jersey remained inhumane.

"Dring's narrative represented an intellectual investment of time," says David.

"He wanted to share the truth about what had happened and seemed compelled to tell the details of his imprisonment."

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It was David's job to take Dring's manuscript and type it exactly as it was written without making any changes.

This manuscript remains in Dring's own words as he wrote it. David simply modernized some of the words so readers would better understand them.

David also conducted extensive research in order to interpret the historical document.

"I needed to figure out how all of these facts fit together and determine the overall message that Dring was trying to communicate," says David.

According to David, Dring seemed concerned

that people would forget about the sacrifices people made on prison ships.

It was important to him that people understood the message he was trying to convey and that he document it in a way so historians and the general public could understand and remember it for prosperity.

David wrote an introduction, along with notes on every page, to put the manuscript into historical context and explain the details. When David left the Rhode Island Historical Society, the manuscript was virtually complete.

However, when the Historical Society's grant ended, it had run out of funding to publish this book.

David asked for and received permission to publish Dring's memoir on his

own.

However he was unable to find a publisher.

Forty years later, in 2009, David and his wife moved to Pennswood Village in Newtown.

Having already invested so much time on Dring's manuscript, David updated his introduction and notes on this memoir based on updated research conducted throughout the past four decades.

Meanwhile, David, now a retired community activist, professor of public administration, and historian, began volunteering at the David Library on a weekly basis.

While at the library, he mentioned Dring's memoir and inquired whether anyone knew of someone who might want to publish it.

He was advised to con-

tact Westholme Publishing, an independent publishing house based in Yardley.

Within four days, David received a letter that his edited book would finally be published.

"Recollections of Life on the Prison Ship Jersey" is now available at [www.westholmepublishing.com](http://www.westholmepublishing.com), Amazon.com, and at the David Library, located at 1201 River Road in Washington Crossing.

Thomas Dring might be gone, but thanks to David Swain, Dring has accomplished his purpose of preserving the memory of British prison ship life and death during the Revolutionary War.

This book helps remind us of both the inhumane horrors and the heroic sacrifices spawned by war.