

**Decision Activity – Prisoner Exchange**  
**Middlesex County, NJ September 1776**

In the summer of 1776, the American Patriots were struggling to hold British attacks off with their meager forces. The capital city of New Jersey is Perth Amboy, a short distance from New York Harbor where the opening battle of the American revolution took place.

After the Battle of Brooklyn Heights on Long Island on August 27-29, 1776 over 20,000 American soldiers in General Washington's army were captured and sent to prison ships and prisons in New York. (Lurie, 72). The conditions in these prisons were deadly due to overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and lack of food. According to Alexander Coffin Jr., "But to cap the climax of infamy we were fed (if fed it might be called) with provisions not fit for any human being to make use of—putrid beef and pork, and worm-eaten bread." (Thompson, 241)



The prison ship, the *Jersey*

***Would you like to be...***

An officer in General Washington's army stationed near Perth Amboy?

An enlisted soldier from Middlesex County captured by the British and held captive on the *Jersey*, prison ship stationed in the Atlantic near Perth Amboy?

You face challenges and officers and enlisted men alike struggle to survive for the next few months, but during the disastrous Battle of Long Island, many in your battalion are taken prisoner by the British. On September 11, two weeks after the Battle of Long Island, and five days before the Battle of Harlem Heights, Ben Franklin, John Adams, and Edward Rutledge secretly met with British Admiral Richard Howe to discuss the release of the prisoners held by the British. The British have captured thousands of Americans and there are perhaps hundreds of British citizens (Loyalists) and several British officers held in detention in different colonies, including some in prisons in Perth Amboy and Burlington, New Jersey.

<p>If you are an <b>officer</b>, you were able to escape, but now you have to decide if and how to negotiate for the release of others held in captivity.</p> <p>The winter months are coming and the prisons in New York have no heat and the prison ships on the open seas are subject to extreme weather conditions. The fate of all prisoners is at risk.</p>	<p>If you are an <b>enlisted man</b>, you were captured and taken to the prison ship <i>Jersey</i>, where you are forced to endure terrible conditions that you may not survive. You can either wait for your release to be negotiated and hope for the war to end soon or disavow your loyalty to the Continental Army and join the British.</p>
<p><b>Quote to consider:</b></p> <p><i>Adams' description of his meeting with General Howe on September 9, 1776</i></p> <p>"Lord Howe had sent over an Officer as a Hostage for our Security. I said to Dr. Franklin, it would be childish in Us to depend upon such a Pledge and insisted on taking him over with Us, and keeping our Surety on the same side of the Water with Us. ...We walked up to the House between Lines of Guards of Grenadiers, looking as fierce as ten furies, and making all the Grimaces and Gestures and motions of their Musquets with Bayonets fixed, which I suppose military Ettiquette requires but which We neither understood nor regarded." Frazza,</p>	<p><b>Quote to consider:</b></p> <p><i>Captain Thomas Dring on his imprisonment on the Jersey prison ship</i></p> <p>"Thousands there suffered and died, whose names have never been known to their countrymen. They died where no eye could witness their fortitude, no tounge could describe their sufferings, or praise their devotion to their country. For years, the very name of 'the Old Jersey,' seemed to strike a terror to the hearts of those whose necessities required to venture upon the ocean; the mortality which prevailed on board her was well known throughout the country; and to be confined within her dungeons, was considered equal to a sentence of death, from which but little hope of escape remained." Thompson, 240</p>
<p><b>Your Choices:</b></p>	<p><b>Your Choices:</b></p>
<p>Why should the British consider soldiers captured in battle as prisoners of war since England does not recognize the independence of their American colonies?</p> <p>How will you convince the British to provide for humanitarian conditions for the prisoners they have without any means to enforce a code of conduct?</p> <p>If you have a British officer in an American jail would you be willing to negotiate the release of one officer for a number of enlisted soldiers in the Continental Army?</p> <p>How will you prevent the British from going house to house and arresting innocent Americans in the territories they hold, potential to trade for British officers and soldiers held in American prisons?</p> <p>Should you provide a guarantee to the British that American soldiers will not return to the battlefield if released?</p> <p>If you were traveling with Franklin, Adams, and Rutledge when they were leaving Perth Amboy to meet with the British on Staten Island to discuss the release of prisoners, what would</p>	<p>In the face of death from starvation or unsanitary conditions in a British prison ship, would you be willing to sign the Oath of Abjuration and Loyalty to the British government or would you remain loyal to your comrades?</p> <p>When faced with the brutal reality of prison and the potential of death by disease, what would you do to try to save your friend's life?</p> <p>The prisoners also include women and children. Women and children were also captured in the battles of New York and northern New Jersey. Would you be willing to sacrifice some of your already limited food to help a woman feed her starving child?</p> <p>Would you be willing to risk hanging for treason or additional punishment by sending a message to the Americans begging for release?</p> <p>Should the Continental Congress request the help of a foreign government to negotiate with England on the release of American prisoners or negotiate for improved humanitarian conditions? Which country would you recommend and why? What is the incentive for this government to support the Americans?</p>

you do to ensure your own safety?

If you were to negotiate a prisoner exchange, what should the Continental Congress offer for the release of enlisted American soldiers?



Oath of Allegiance (Lurie, p.81)



Interior of *Jersey* (Darley and Bookhout)

## Sources

The History of Long Island; from its Discovery and Settlement, to the Present Time. With Many Important and Interesting Matters; Including Notices of Numerous Individuals and Families; Also a Particular Account of the Different Churches and Ministers, by Benjamin Franklin Thompson, 1843. [Linked here](#)

Taking Sides in Revolutionary New Jersey: Caught in the Crossfire, by Maxine N. Lurie, 2022.

“Revolutionary War Sites in Perth Amboy, New Jersey,” by Al Frazza, 2022. [Linked here](#)

Interior of the old Jersey prison ship, in the Revolutionary War, Edward Bookhout, engraver, and Felix Octavius Carr Darley, artist, 1855. [Linked here](#)