

## Loyalism in Rensselaer County

*By Tom Barker*

During the War for Independence, Gilead Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brunswick Center, New York, was a hotbed of Loyalist or Tory sentiment. There were different reasons for this. Two stand out. Many, probably a majority of the parishioners, were tenant farmers of the upper portion of the Van Rensselaers' East Manor and subject to rental payments and various other onerous, material exactions. The congregation was then predominantly Palatine, that is, eighteenth century German-American, with a certain representation of Lowland Dutchmen and recent New England Yankee immigrants. The second factor was that the European-born pastor, Johann Wilhelm Samuel Schwerdtfeger (1734-1803), who also ministered to the large German population in Albany (First Lutheran Church), was a strong advocate of fidelity to the Crown, as represented by the German-descended monarch, the Hannoverian George III. This was regular trouble with the Patriot or Whig authorities in Albany. Moreover, one of his own sons joined the Tory militia under Franz Joseph Pfister (c.1740-1777), a parishioner, at the Battle of Bennington, where Pfister, Hoosick's political boss, was killed. It should be stressed that the Albany rebel junta was the instrument of the Mid-Hudson's landed, ruling class, among which the Van Rensselaers, Schuylers and Livingstons were especially prominent.

Historians now believe that persons of this ilk had seized control of the regional uprising because they feared the influence of republican, political radicals among the lower and "middling" strata of pre-Revolutionary society, then probably 90% of New York's population. The "better-sort" were particularly successful in their efforts to monopolize the officer slots in the Whig militia.

After the war (1787) Schwerdtfeger sought to emigrate with the apparent bulk of Gilead's congregation to Quebec, but a specific request for land was ignored by the royal governor, Lord Dorchester (Sir Guy Carleton). However, Schwerdtfeger did leave on an individual basis in 1791 and served as pastor of the ex-New York Palatines – i.e., Loyalist refugees – whom the British government had granted undeveloped tracts of territory around Williamsburgh, Upper Canada (later Ontario), just downriver from Kingston. Many of these settlers had belonged previously to Gilead.

Schwerdtfeger never forgot the harsh treatment to which he and his family had been subjected by the victorious insurgent faction. Study of Gilead's history during the War for Independence tends to support the current viewpoint of historians that, in New York especially, the fighting was more in the nature of a domestic conflict – not in fact a genuine revolution – than was previously thought. The old "aristocracy," demonstrably, remained in charge of political affairs until the election of 1800. Thus, some scholars would even argue that "The First Civil War" is a more appropriate term for the events of 1775-1783.