

The Revd Doctor John Vardill, First and Last Regius Professor of Divinity at King's College, New York, later Columbia University

American Loyalist educator, pamphleteer, clergyman, playwright, poet, and spy

Baptized in New York City on 5th July 1749

Died at St Marylebone, London on 16th January 1811, buried in St Marylebone



John Vardill was born in New York City, the son of a ship's captain.

He studied at King's College, New York City, starting in 1762 at age 13, first under the President Dr. Samuel Johnson, then President Myles Cooper. He tutored other students in moral philosophy and natural law, and assisted Dr. Samuel Clossy in anatomical lectures. He graduated with a B.A. in 1766, and received an M.A. in 1769.

At age 19, beginning in January 1769, he wrote a series of anti-Presbyterian anti-Whig articles in the newspaper the *Whip*. In 1772, he co-authored with President Cooper a pamphlet in response to an attack on King's College by John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey. He authored a series of pro-British political broadsides in 1773 supporting the Tea tax under the pseudonym *Poplicola*, one of which

went to four imprints. He was appointed professor of natural philosophy and moral philosophy at King's the next year. He was also appointed assistant Minister and Lecturer at Trinity Church, New York City.

London

In early 1774, before actually acting in these new roles of professor or minister, he journeyed to London to take Anglican orders. Though he didn't know it at the time, he would be "one of the earliest exiles of the American Revolutionary War " which started that year.

He received a M.A. from Oxford on June 28, and was appointed by the King a Royal or Regius

Professor "for the purpose of defending the Christian, & maintaining the grand Principles of Natural, Religion, by annual Lectures on those Subjects", and granted 200 pounds a year to sustain him in England. He advocated while in London for the appointment of a Bishop for America, and for a revised charter for King's College, supporting his former mentor President Cooper.

Beginning in 1774, still in London as the war had begun, he wrote a series of newspaper columns signed with the pseudonym *Coriolanus* in support of Lord North's ministry. Vardill "had a rare accessibility to the offices of the powerful" in England, and may have been more important than the Governor of New York" in influence. He lived on Downing Street and was consulted in 1778 by the Carlisle Peace Commissions. He later told a Loyalist commission that, "He devoted his time, from 1775 to 1781, to the service of [the] Government" which paid him 200 pounds a year since he could not return home.

Vardill the Spy

Sometime in 1776, Vardill was recruited by English spymaster William Eden (later Lord Auckland) and became "one of the under-secretary's three most important Agents". "Vardill's activities were centered" on Americans in England, "where he kept alert to opportunities for obtaining information or recruiting new agents." Vardill recruited an American named Van Zant, "who had considerable influence with Dr. Franklin." He recruited a Mrs. Jamp, proprietor of a bordello in Dover, and through her recruited an American sea captain name Hyson, who was on a mission from the American Commissioners in Paris, and bragged about it.

Vardill thus was able to intercept important dispatches from Paris, and use the information to capture "many Vessels bound to America". Commissioner Silas Dean trusted Hyson, and so the complete correspondence between the American Commissioners and the French Court were put into the hands of the British. He also turned a Captain Deveraux, who revealed letters to American contacts in Europe.

He recruited with the mistress of British-American double agent Dr. Edward Bancroft, who was Benjamin Franklin's personal secretary while Franklin was in France. Bancroft was suspected by both sides of working for the other, and Vardill provided evidence confirming Bancroft's loyalties. Vardill proved a brilliant and persuasive spy, turning agent after agent to the Loyalist British side, but his successes were in the end counter-productive and he could not prevent the Americans signing a treaty with France.

In 1780, in a series of articles called "The Alarms", and in a pamphlet titled *An Address to the Inhabitants of London and Westminster Containing Reflections on the present State of Public Affairs*, he attacked Christopher Wyvill's Yorkshire Association Movement, an early attempt to reform the British government, much in the same way he had attacked the opposition to the Tea tax in New York City in 1773. For services rendered, he received 500 pounds from the North Government.

After the War

With the turning of the war in America's favor, at Yorktown in 1781, Vardill realized his exile would be permanent, and that his services would not longer been needed by the government. He applied to the Loyalist claims commission in 1783 for compensation, and for his promised

professorship. He claimed a loss of 1,100 pounds per year for nine years as professor at King's College and as Assistant Minister of Trinity Church New York City, though he had actually never started working at either job. As a perceived agent of the now disgraced North Administration, his claim to the promised Regius Professorship was rejected outright in 1784 by Commissioner Col. Thomas Dundas. He received only 500 pounds total compensation in 1785 for his nine years of lost salary in America.

The British Government system he had so strongly and repeatedly defended in print and in espionage against his native land essentially turned its back on its most vigorous and earliest American supporter; Vardill left the commission meeting "in turmoil" with a feeling of "keen injustice", and that "after sacrificing all, he was to be granted neither the honor of the country's recognition of his commitment to her cause, nor the financial compensation simple justice demanded."

He wrote no more political pamphlets, and abandoned London and the exciting life of a spy for rural domesticity as a country parson.

Though a brilliant spy in many ways, he played no part in the events of the Napoleonic Wars. He is reported to have been in Ireland in 1785 and 1786. He received the living of Skirbeck and Fishtof in Lincolnshire in 1791, remaining there until his death in 1811.

He was a published poet: *The Spirit of Toussaint A Fragment* appeared three after his death in the *European Magazine* for July 1814.

He wrote at least one play, titled *The Unknown*, which was performed in 1819, eight years after his death, at the Surrey Theatre.

Legacy

As a Loyalist, "Vardill had two important distinctions. First, he left America before the bonds of social order disintegrated, and therefore did not need to base his reaction to revolution on a personal fear of violence. Second, his principles survived five years of war to be used in an English setting against the Yorkshire movement, where his response was the same as it had been in America."

As a pamphleteer his pro-British views had no effect either in America or England. His spying helped only to discredit and place under suspicion Silas Dean, who later turned Loyalist in any case. Though he gathered a great deal of intelligence, at the time "secret intelligence more often presented a puzzle which caused vacillation and procrastination" by the King and his ministers, and impeded the British government more than it helped. Some of his information did lead to the interception of American shipping. However, his most brilliant coup, the theft of the American Commissioner's dispatches "did more harm than good." The Congress never received their depressing news about the unlikely chance of a French alliance, and the Commissioner's gloomy assessments strengthened the British government's resolve to continue the war without granting independence. Both of these unintended results prevented an early negotiated end to the war that might have rejected American independence. Thus, in the end, if ironically and unintentionally, Loyalist Vardill, served his birth country better than many Patriots.

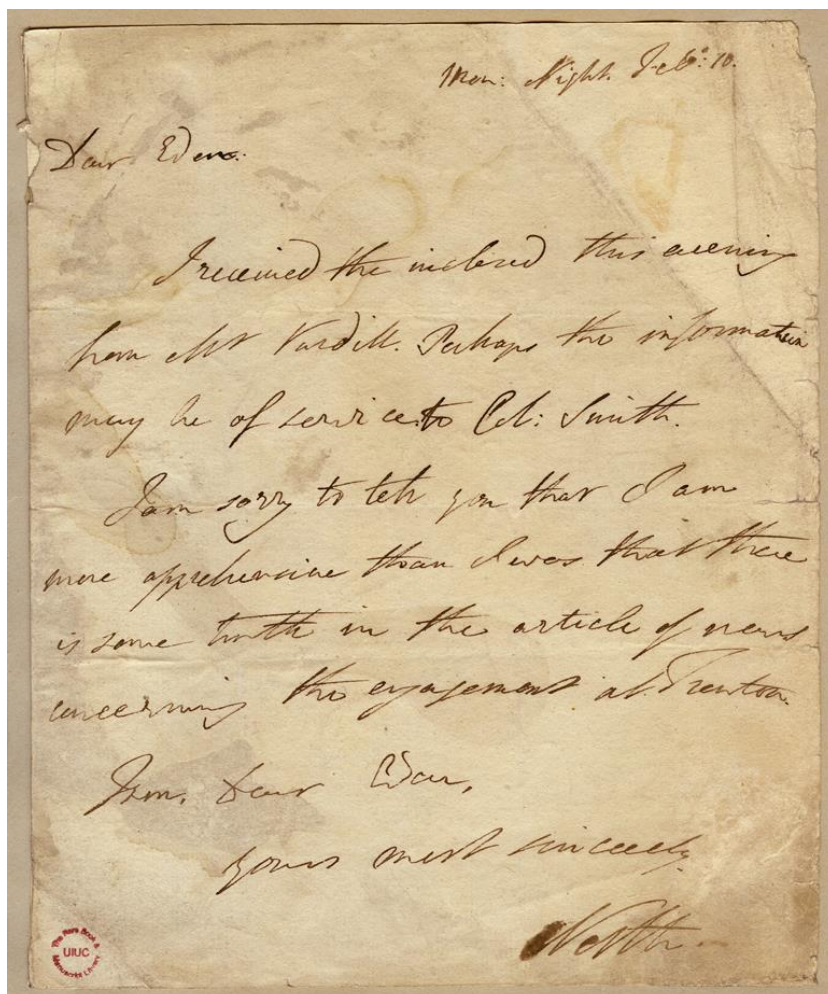
Children

His only child was his daughter the poet Anna Jane Vardill (1781–1852), born on November 19, 1781 in London. Her father was a strong influence on her education; in her first published work, *Poems and translations*, (1809), she states that her "most indulgent father...found amusement in familiarizing his only child with the Poets of Antiquity".

In a later tribute to him she wrote: "These and the subsequent lines are a feeble tribute to the memory of a most revered and lamented father, whose death is still recent. His keen wit and fluent eloquence were enriched by the mildest urbanity, and his profound scholastic knowledge by the most endearing social virtues. His presence was the light of his domestic circle, and gave joy to every society he entered. Ever devoting his rare talents to the purest philanthropy, he beautified religion by his example."

An inscription for a memorial tablet written by his daughter was published in the *European Magazine*, February, 1811: if the commissioners denied his right to a Regis Professorship, his poet daughter repeatedly named him by that title, and made sure by essays, poems, and this tablet, that history would so remember him.

Later in life, widowed after her marriage to James Niven, she later became a close friend of novelist Mary Russell Mitford.



Letter from Lord North to William Eden mentioning intelligence received from Vardill dated 10th February 1777. "I received the inclosed this evening from Mr Vardill. Perhaps the information may be of service to Col: Smith. I am sorry to tell you that I am more apprehensive than I was that there is some truth in the article of news concerning the engagement at Trenton. I am, dear Eden, yours most sincerely, North."

On the night of Monday, February 10, 1777, Lord North the British prime minister sat at his desk at 10 Downing Street and wrote a quick note to his friend and chief intelligence official, William Eden. In addition to forwarding to Eden a letter intercepted by the spy John Vardill, North revealed his concern about the American victory at Trenton, New Jersey some six weeks earlier: I am

sorry to tell you that I am more apprehensive than I was that there is some truth in the article of news concerning the engagement at Trenton.

North had reason to be concerned. Before Washington's victory at Trenton in late December 1776, the fate of the American Revolution hung in doubt and the colonists' morale had reached its lowest point. Forced to retreat from New York City through New Jersey, Washington found himself and his army encamped in Pennsylvania as the campaign season drew to a close for the winter. Thomas Paine, visiting Philadelphia, discovered the American cause to be in such a perilous state that he endeavored to revive it with a series of pamphlets. The first began: "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sun-shine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country: but he that stands it now, deserves the thanks of man and woman."

Washington believed that a victory at this nadir would go far in rousing the spirits of the troops and the American colonists in general. On the morning of December 26, 1776, Washington led his troops across the nearly-frozen Delaware River and through a snowstorm to seize some 900 Hessian mercenaries at Trenton. The Continental Army went on to defeat the British at Princeton a few days later. In the words of David McCullough, "[I]t was Trenton that meant the most, Trenton and the night crossing of the Delaware that were rightly seen as a great turning point. With the victory at Trenton came the realization that Americans had bested the enemy, bested the fearsome Hessians, the King's detested hirelings, outsmarted them and outfought them, and so might well again."

Indeed, Washington's victory at Trenton boosted morale throughout the colonies and rekindled the drive that would lead to victory and American independence half a decade later. North's apprehensions would prove to be well-founded.

The Letter was acquired by The Rare Book & Manuscript Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in June 2008, Lord North's letter documents the prime minister's realization that perhaps the empire which he led could be humbled by defeat at the hands of the Americans.

Author: North, Frederick, Lord, 1732-1792.
Title: [Letter 1777 Feb. 10 to William Eden] [manuscript].
Published: [1777]
Physical Description: [1] p. on 1 leaf ; 23 x 19 cm.

Summary: Letter from Lord North to William Eden: "I received the inclosed this evening from Mr Vardill. Perhaps the information may be of service to Col: Smith. I am sorry to tell you that I am more apprehensive than I was that there is some truth in the article of news concerning the engagement at Trenton. I am, dear Eden, yours most sincerely, North."

Subject (LCSH): North, Frederick, Lord, 1732-1792 --Manuscripts.
North, Frederick, Lord, 1732-1792 --Correspondence.
Auckland, William Eden, Baron, 1744-1814 --

Correspondence.

Trenton, Battle of, Trenton, N.J., 1776.
Manuscripts, English --Illinois --Urbana.
Genre/Form: Letters --18th century.
Other Name: Auckland, William Eden, Baron, 1744-1814, recipient.
Jackson, Dorothy Vernon Gee, honoree.

Post-1650 Manuscript Collection (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library)

Notes:

Holograph, signed.

Title supplied by cataloger.

Dated "Mon: Night. Febr: 10."

Provenance: Acquired from Bonhams, June 24, 2008 (sale 16202, lot 162), through the Dorothy Vernon Gee Jackson Endowment Fund (In memory of Dorothy Vernon Gee Jackson by Richard Willett Jackson, Marianne Jackson, and William Thomas Jackson).

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References

Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Vardill

Silas Deane: Death by a Kindly Teacher of Treason? By Julian P. Boyd, published in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Jul., 1959), pp. 319-342, Published by: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture Article Stable <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1916948>

To the worthy inhabitants of the city of New-York, 1773 under the pseudonym "Poplicola"

His own account of his activities is published in Lewis Einstein's *Divided Loyalties, Americans in England during the war of independence*, (Boston and London, 1933), pp. 411 – 417

King's College, New York later Columbia University in the City of New York

Columbia was founded in 1754 as King's College by royal charter of King George II of England. It is the oldest institution of higher learning in the state of New York and the fifth oldest in the United States.

Controversy preceded the founding of the College, with various groups competing to determine its location and religious affiliation. Advocates of New York City met with success on the first point, while the Anglicans prevailed on the latter. However, all constituencies agreed to commit themselves to principles of religious liberty in establishing the policies of the College.

In July 1754, Samuel Johnson held the first classes in a new schoolhouse adjoining Trinity Church, located on what is now lower Broadway in Manhattan. There were eight students in the class. At King's College, the future leaders of colonial society could receive an education designed to "enlarge the Mind, improve the Understanding, polish the whole Man, and qualify them to

support the brightest Characters in all the elevated stations in life." One early manifestation of the institution's lofty goals was the establishment in 1767 of the first American medical school to grant the M.D. degree.



Columbia's first home, Trinity Schoolhouse

The American Revolution brought the growth of the college to a halt, forcing a suspension of instruction in 1776 that lasted for eight years. However, the institution continued to exert a significant influence on American life through the people associated with it. Among the earliest students and trustees of King's College were John Jay, the first chief justice of the United States; Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the treasury; Gouverneur Morris, the author of the final draft of the U.S. Constitution; and Robert R. Livingston, a member of the five-man committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence.

The college reopened in 1784 with a new name—Columbia—that embodied the patriotic fervor that had inspired the nation's quest for independence. The revitalized institution was recognizable as the descendant of its colonial ancestor, thanks to its inclination toward Anglicanism and the needs of an urban population, but there were important differences: Columbia College reflected the legacy of the Revolution in the greater economic, denominational, and geographic diversity of its new students and leaders. Cloistered campus life gave way to the more common phenomenon of day students who lived at home or lodged in the city.