Interview with Dr. Holly Mayer

On April 25, 2023, CENFAD welcomed Dr. Holly A. Mayer, Professor Emerita of History at Duquesne University, to Philadelphia for a presentation titled "Securing Borders: The Champlain Valley to Coos Country, 1778-1779," which drew from her recent book *Congress's Own: A Canadian Regiment, the Continental Army, and American Union* (University of Oklahoma Press). CENFAD's Davis Fellow Ryan Langton met with Dr. Mayer over Zoom to discuss her book. The complete interview can be viewed here.

RL: Welcome, Dr. Mayer, and thank you for taking the time to speak with me.

HM: It's great to be with you, and it was great to be with everybody at CENFAD earlier this week.

RL: Your book, *Congress's Own*, studies the 2nd Canadian Regiment, which fought in favor of the American Revolution. How did you first come across this regiment? What about it made you want to write a history about this particular regiment?

HM: I was not seeking to do a regimental history, actually. My primary goal was to write about the creation of American identity while in military service in the Continental Army. I've always been interested in how these provincials became Americans or defined themselves as Americans. I was actually here in Philadelphia, at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, searching for personal sources where people might reflect on what they were doing, why they were doing it, and who they were in the process of fighting in the American Revolution. I had come across a great journal – Sergeant Major John H. Hawkins's Journal – and I started to read it and said, "Oh, this is fantastic, I might want to work on this," but he wasn't telling me much about American identity. He was telling me about this regiment – he talked about what it was doing, and the biggest thing that struck me was that I did not really know anything about this regiment. I had not encountered many people who had heard about Canadians serving for the American side in the American Revolution – in other words joining the Continental Army. But this did make sense – we were talking about a Continental force, the Continental Congress had been urging Canadians to join in the rebellion and fight for independence, so why didn't they fight for their independence along with the rest of the provincials? I thought this was fantastic and I had to do more research. The typical thing that we all find is when we come across something in our research, we have to know more. You end up going off in another direction in some form, and I've got to tell people – do it. Let the sources sometimes guide us, instead of saying we are going to make sure the sources give us exactly what we want and nothing more beyond that.

So that is how I started doing research on what was nicknamed "Congress's Own," which was the 2nd Canadian Regiment that was commanded by Colonel Moses Hazen. There was one book out, written around 1976, about Moses Hazen and the Canadian refugees. That was great for getting into the information but the book was all about Canadian refugees, yet I had a journal from a

Philadelphia guy (John H. Hawkins) who was in the regiment. What about all the others in the regiment, not just the Canadian refuges?…That's how I found the topic – Sergeant Major Hawkins led me to the 2nd Canadian Regiment, and as I followed his story, I was following the story of the regiment. I ended up working on that whole regimental story because it is a story of a diverse regiment with members from all of the states except for Georgia and South Carolina that also included German POW's and some British deserters. I asked – how did they do this? How did they integrate all of these men from different regions, different backgrounds, into a fighting force?

RL: One of the points you make in your book is that Congress's Own and the Continental Army as a whole can be considered a moving borderland. When we think of borderlands in eighteenth-century North America, particularly during the Revolutionary Era, scholars more often focus on fixed geographic spaces where individuals with these trans-imperial, transnational, and cross-cultural connections negotiated among competing opportunities and loyalties. How did Congress's Own and the Continental Army constitute borderlands in their own right?

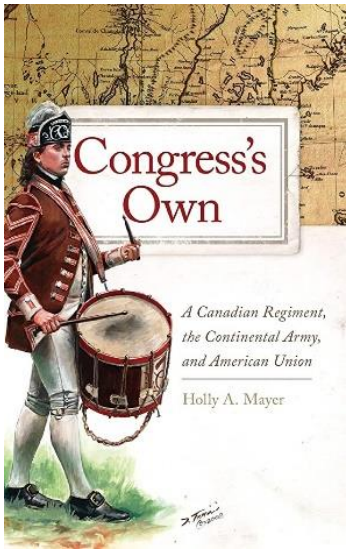
HM: It comes back to my interest in identity formation, in some form or another. I had studied some borderlands and been teaching some aspects of them in my classes, and I came back to this because I kept asking myself – what kind of community is this? How do you bring all of these people together, to work together, to live together, and then, ultimately, because it is a military community, to have a shared mission? The thing that came closest to this kind of formation was what we see often in older community studies or borderland studies, where they talk about how various groups of people come into contact and intermingle with each other, and not always in conflict. These studies ask how do people intermingle and work together and create new identities, new communities, new systems that are not one or the other. Many of these studies are about the borderland between Mexico and the United States. We also have many borderland studies between Canada and the United States. They are usually very nation-oriented, and about different peoples with different languages, distinct and different cultures. The same thing we see in borderland studies in Europe – between different nations or distinct different cultural groups, often different linguistic groups as well. What about the Continental Army? Members came from different regions. We know from our own studies of early America that [colonies and regions] often had different cultural components to them. They sometimes had different languages – obviously with Congress's Own the different languages included French, from the Francophones coming from Canada, Anglophones, and then, in some cases, German because of the German POW's. So, we have multi-linguistic groups from different regions of early America with their particular cultures, and they all came together. How did they do that? That's part of the definition of a borderland. I wanted to think about an army as a different kind of community – one in which all these different components may intermingle, intersperse, and maybe integrate.

"[The story of Congress's Own] is a story of a diverse regiment with members from all the states except Georgia and South Carolina that also included German POW's and some British deserters… How did they integrate all of these men from different regions, different backgrounds, into a fighting force?"

RL: What were some of the challenges involved in forming and maintaining this regiment that drew its soldiers from so many different communities?

HM: … Each of the states saw itself somewhat as a different nation and this army maneuvered between all of those state lines, those borderlands between these states. This created a conflict that we can see with the Continental Army at large and with Congress's Own. Each one of these states deemed itself independent and wanted to have control over its own people. In the Continental Army, that meant these states recruited the men for their own particular regiments – 1st Pennsylvania, 1st Virginia, and so forth. They were also supplying those particular troops instead of Congress providing a uniform kind of payment and supply for all of the soldiers.

This happened in Congress's Own. Congress gave the regiment permission to recruit from all the different states and that those states could count these soldiers as part of their quotas, but in turn those states were supposed to pay those soldiers, which meant that the regiment – just like the Continental Army – was dealing with states who weren't always coordinating with one another. Instead, they tried to trump one another with how much they were willing to pay, how good they were with supplying the men with the materials – food, supplies, everything they needed. Colonel Moses Hazen was fighting with the different states, just as George Washington was writing to governors and Congress saying his different regiments needed supplies from these different states or more recruits from these different states. There were constant negotiations back and forth with multiple states, with Congress trying to reign in multiple regiments from different states, and then there was this regiment that had companies with soldiers from different states. It is a very complicated mix…By 1781 when the Articles of Confederation were being ratified in the midst of war, some people were looking at these complexities about manning, supplying, and fielding an army and saying that these articles are not going to be enough. You can't maintain a proper defense if everything is scattered around. They are already starting to think about a "big U" United States that has a central government that can work with a centralized military to support all, instead of each individually.



RL: Your book also discusses the different formal and informal names the regiment had during its existence and how that was a product of these intersecting identities. Could you tell us more about these names?

HM: Congress had to authorize the 1st and 2nd Canadian regiments, and they had done so in early 1776 when the revolutionaries were still hoping that Canadians would join in this push for independence from Great Britain. They had hoped if Canada and Nova Scotia had joined as new states, then they would supply soldiers and support regiments like the other states were doing. Obviously, that did not happen. By June of '76, the Continental Army had retreated from Canada and they didn't go back up into Canada. So, what to do with these regiments? At first, it was perhaps just let them go – Canadian regiments wouldn't be reauthorized. In the end, Congress continued them, but it recognized that if you can't recruit among Canadians because you were not there in Canada then you have to recruit elsewhere, and they opened up recruiting throughout the states. That's already a really big move, if you think about it. The states were already recruiting within their states for their state-affiliated regiments…But now the Continental Congress – still a coordinating body and not a fully-fledged government – put out the call for [the Canadian regiments] to recruit anywhere they could get men. Congress was now taking on another power, but that meant that Congress needed to become a central body telling the states that they need to support these regiments in some form or another.

The 2nd Canadian was reauthorized, but the officers knew full well that they were not going to get a lot of people joining this regiment if it was called the 2nd Canadian – who from Pennsylvania was going to join the 2nd Canadian? Why wouldn't they join a Pennsylvania regiment instead? So, one of the officers – it could have been Hazan but I think it was Lieutenant Colonel [Edward] Antill for various reasons – came up with calling it Congress's Own. In other words, they gave it a special name – an honorific – and said it was a special regiment. This was not unusual – in the British Army, there were many regiments with honorifics such as the Queen's Own and the King's Own, which meant the Queen or King was the honorary colonel. Calling it Congress's Own made Congress its honorary colonel – that helped recruit people. They attracted a bunch of other officers from various other states who said, "I'm going to go into Congress's Own, this special regiment," and they then recruited other soldiers. It was a great recruiting pitch. It was what many of the officers preferred to call themselves as opposed to the 2nd Canadian. The problem was that Congress's Own kept having fights; it was a rather rambunctious regiment with a lot of good fighters, but the fighting occurred not just against the enemy but sometimes with [other Continentals], and that could make them a little hard to handle. A few people called them "Infernals," and these "Infernals" irritated Congress to the point that Congress told them to stop calling themselves Congress's Own…This is one of the things we need to recognize when we are looking at these regiments, and we're looking at them as communities – what did they call themselves, and why? What identity were they giving themselves? How does that help them as a fighting force or develop a sense of belonging between them all?

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RL: The book argues that Congress's Own Regiment can serve as a microcosm for the Continental Army and the revolutionary United States. In what ways did the regiment reflect the possibilities and problems of the emerging U.S.?

HM: The regiment had companies from different states, two francophone Canadian [companies] with an officer who spoke French that were a little separate from the rest. As recruiting went underway in 1777, companies that were primarily from Pennsylvania had a Pennsylvania officer, the Delaware company had a Delaware officer, so on. What we see in the company level is what George Washington had to deal with among the regiments. The 1st Pennsylvania Regiment had Pennsylvania soldiers and Pennsylvania officers, for example. Officers and soldiers were coming from particular states or regions, and they brought this sense of belonging or connection among them all. Washington, originally and for a quite a few years, hoped that he would not have to deal with the constant necessity of having officers be from the same state as their soldiers. He wanted to be able to move officers who had proven themselves to be really good officers into the regiments where he needed their expertise, but he kept getting push back in that the states had control about who they nominated for these positions and then Congress would confirm the appointment. We see this with the companies in Hazan's regiment. Initially, officers and soldiers shared a regional connection. What I was interested in was, do they ultimately integrate? In other words, do we finally see Pennsylvanians, New Yorkers, Connecticut men integrating as Americans in the regiment? Could they get beyond staying in their own little enclaves? Well, it did not happen quite as

well as I had hoped. Again, you have to stick to what the sources say, not what you hoped you would find. There was a lot of push back – the soldiers held on to these older regional identities.

The issue in the case of multiple identities is which takes precedence – when, where, why? In this case, as Hazan's regiment started to decline in numbers, as all the regiments did when they lost men over the course of the war, the regiment eliminated companies because it didn't have as many soldiers and officers. They started moving one company into another company, and that led them to start moving Pennsylvanians in with Virginians or New Yorkers for very pragmatic reasons. Because of necessity we see the start of integration. This tells us that this coming together was not necessarily ideological – it is not about ideals and that they were all fighting together. It was for pragmatic reasons – they needed numbers to work effectively within all of these companies. That is one of the lessons that we get out of looking at the army and these companies – how does the pragmatic interconnect with idealism. Sometimes, pragmatism meant they needed to put the ideals aside, but sometimes pragmatic reasons brought the army closer to these ideals.

RL: Do you have any plans for what you will work on next?

HM: I have retired as a professor but not as an historian, so it's just a matter of what projects I want to do. Right now, I am thinking of two different things in terms of writing projects. One would be another monograph, and another would be an edited account, for instance, of Sergeant Major Hawkins's Journal. It is a wonderful piece. I have it transcribed, now it is just about what is the next step with it. The other part is, since I am not teaching formally, whether to teach informally in continuing education programs or at historical sites, not necessarily as a docent, but certainly by supporting sites with their own historical research and how it is presented to the public. There are other avenues along which to keep, as Poirot might say, the little gray cells moving.

RL: Dr. Mayer, thank you so much.

HM: Thank you very much, Ryan.