wanted to break away completely from the Crown, he increas-
ingly found himself drawn into the movement for independence.

As the Revolution drew near, he became a member of Elizabethtown’s Committee of Safety, which organized and supplied the local militia and enforced trade boycotts against Britain. In 1775, he was elected as a delegate to New Jersey’s Provincial Congress, which overthrew Royal Governor William Franklin, a fierce Loyalist and the illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin. When the first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired at Lexington and Concord that April, Boudinot was among the first to alert surrounding communities to the skirmishes. As battles with the British began to rage, he helped recruit soldiers and supply the Continental Army with gunpowder and intelligence on Redcoat movements in the region.

As late as April 1776, Boudinot still hoped for a peaceful reconciliation with the Crown, publicly opposing a call by College of New Jersey President John Witherspoon for the Colony to declare its independence from Great Britain. But as the British began invading New York Harbor that summer, he could no longer justify that hope and became fully committed to the fight for independence. Moving his family to a farm in Basking Ridge, N.J., for safety, Boudinot joined in armed resistance as an aide-de-camp to William Livingston, commander of the militia from East Jersey.

**An Arduous Commission**

By December 1776, the British had captured more than 4,000 American prisoners in the New York and New Jersey campaigns, holding them in overcrowded jails, warehouses, churches and prison ships. Prisoners were given just two-thirds the daily ration of a British soldier, and their captors refused to provide basic amenities such as clothing, bedding or firewood. The British expected prisoners’ families, friends and fellow citizens to provide anything beyond the meager rations their captors doled out.

With hundreds dying in captivity and no end in sight, General George Washington called upon Congress to establish a centralized authority for handling prisoners of war, and a Commissary General of Prisoners post was created. In April 1777, Boudinot received an unexpected letter from Washington asking him to accept the position. Initially, he declined the offer, daunted by the overwhelming “wants of the prisoners & having nothing to supply them,” as he later recalled in his journal.

Washington refused to take no for an answer, arguing that “if Men of Character & Influence would not come forward & join him in his Exertions all would be lost.” Boudinot relented, accepting the appointment on the conditions that Congress would supply him with “hard Money for the relief of Prisoners,” and that he would take his orders directly from Washington. The position proved more difficult than Boudinot expected. Along with supplementing the scant rations of Americans held by the British and negotiating prisoner exchanges, he was charged with securely housing and caring for British and Hessian prisoners of war. Washington also tasked him with “procuring intelligence” and assisting the far-flung network of spies involved in espionage operations in America and Europe.

Despite being promoted to the rank of colonel in the Continental Army and receiving deputies to help him carry out his duties, Boudinot struggled to get the support he needed to help American prisoners of war.

“The applications of the Prisoners were so numerous and their distress so urgent, that I exerted every nerve to obtain Supplies but in vain,” Boudinot wrote in his journal.
In a letter to Washington describing his dilemma, he explained that the only way to help the prisoners was to borrow money on his own personal credit and from friends.

“He greatly encouraged me to the attempt, promising me that if I finally met with any loss, he would divide it with me,” Boudinot wrote. “On this I began to afford them some supplies of Provisions over and above what the Enemy afforded them, which was very small & very indifferent.”

The ensuing months brought a spike in the number of American prisoners after the British occupied Philadelphia in September and defeated the Patriots in the Battle of Germantown in October. Though Boudinot was chosen to represent New Jersey in the Continental Congress in December 1777, he postponed taking his seat until he could resolve issues with the British over their harsh treatment of prisoners.

In February 1778, British generals permitted Boudinot to visit New York to speak with soldiers and civilians imprisoned throughout the city. Intent on conducting a fair investigation, Boudinot insisted on having a British officer present during the interviews. In the Huguenot church where his father was baptized, he discovered the worst conditions, with hundreds of men forced to eat raw pork and burn pews, doors and window frames for firewood.

Boudinot negotiated relief for these prisoners, borrowing money on his personal credit to provide them with clothing, blankets, and daily rations of bread and beef. After visiting prisoners in New York, he traveled to Long Island, where more than 200 American officers were paroled and living in private residences. There, he was notified that many of the paroled officers had unpaid balances of the $2 a day in board that they were expected to pay while on parole.

Boudinot was told that unless the debt was paid in full, the paroled prisoners would be sent back to the prison ships or prison compounds. Boudinot paid the debt of these officers to keep their paroles from being revoked—and he continued to pay the expenses moving forward. To cover these costs, he asked Americans to send flour and wheat to his agent in New York, who immediately sent a portion of the payment to New York to resume caring for the prisoners.

In August 1778, Boudinot left Congress and returned home to practice law and focus on restoring his financial stability. His respite from public service did not last long. In 1781, he was once again elected to represent New Jersey in Congress. He served on a secret committee of Congress that assisted Washington with procuring weapons and intelligence to carry out the Siege of Yorktown, which entrapped the British army and forced its surrender on October 19, 1781.

The next year brought even more responsibility for Boudinot, who was elected as president of Congress in November 1782—the closest position to a chief executive of the country at the time. He deftly guided Congress through the tumultuous days and months ahead. Though a preliminary peace agreement had been reached with Great Britain, treaty negotiations dragged on for a year and Americans grew impatient. Angry war veterans, frustrated with unfulfilled promises from Congress for back pay, surrounded the Philadelphia statehouse in protest. To protect themselves, Boudinot and fellow congressmen decided to move their proceedings to Princeton, where they met through the summer and fall of 1783.

Boudinot ended his term as president of Congress with the signing of the Treaty of Paris on September 3, 1783, which officially recognized American independence and expanded its territory to the Mississippi River. After taking a six-year hiatus from public service, he was elected to serve as a congressman representing New Jersey in the House of Representatives from 1789 through 1795.

One of Boudinot’s first duties as a congressman was to escort the newly elected George Washington to New York to take his place as the first president of the United States. The letter Boudinot wrote to his wife describing the festivities was so eloquent that it was used to recreate the scene 100 years later during New York’s centennial celebration.

Throughout his tenure in Congress, Boudinot supported Washington’s policies and refused to be drawn into the growing
rift between Federalists, who advocated for a strong central government, and the Democratic-Republican party, who favored republicanism. He was instrumental in establishing the departments of Treasury, War and Foreign Affairs and introduced the resolution calling for a national day of thanksgiving and prayer, which Washington signed and designated for November 26, 1789.

Dismayed by the growing divisions in Congress that resulted in the formation of political parties, Boudinot declined to serve another term after 1795. But his plans to retire changed when Washington asked him to serve as director of the U.S. Mint. Initially believing he lacked the knowledge for the job, Boudinot suggested another colleague, but Washington would consider no one else. Boudinot headed the bureau for a decade, systemizing its rules of operation and overseeing the minting of the first silver and gold coins before retiring in 1805.

Beyond the Public Sphere

Even after his public life ended, Boudinot remained active in civic, religious and educational organizations. A lifelong Presbyterian, he argued for the rights of slaves and American Indians and supported missionary work on the frontier, as well as schools for recent converts to Christianity. One of these students—a Cherokee boy named Gallegina Uwati—befriended Boudinot and asked to take his name. Boudinot agreed, and his namesake went on to publish the Cherokee Nation’s first newspaper and lead its treaty negotiations with the U.S.

In 1816, Boudinot helped found the American Bible Society and served as its first president. Retiring in Burlington, N.J., he devoted his remaining years to biblical studies and wrote the pamphlet The Age of Revelation as a response to the arguments against organized religion in Thomas Paine’s The Age of Reason.

Boudinot died a wealthy man in 1821 at age 81, bequeathing most of his land and fortune to the benevolent causes he championed in life and leaving a lasting mark on the nation he dutifully served.

A DIRE SITUATION

Between the years of 1776 and 1783, more than 11,000 American prisoners of war were held captive and died on 16 British prison ships. According to government estimates, more than twice as many Americans died on prison ships than in all the battles of the Revolutionary War. The infamous prison ships were deplorable: Prisoners were poorly fed and clothed, and their living quarters lacked heat, ventilation and sanitation.

“There were continual noises during the night,” wrote Thomas Dring, a 25-year-old prisoner, in a handwritten narrative that was published as Recollections of Life on the Prison Ship Journey (Westholme Publishing, 2010). “The groans of the sick and dying; the curses poured out by the weary and exhausted upon our inhuman keepers; the restlessness caused by the suffocating heat and the confined and poisoned air; mingled with the wild and incoherent ravings of delirium.”

Prisoners of war were allotted two-thirds the daily ration of a British soldier, according to the Mount Vernon digital encyclopedia. Any other “amenities” such as clothing, bedding, food and firewood were to be provided by the prisoners’ own countrymen. Prisoners could be freed if they renounced the Revolutionary cause and pledged allegiance to King George III.

In December 1776, at the urging of General George Washington, Congress created the post of Commissary General of Prisoners.

“British generals permitted Elias Boudinot, the American commissary general for prisoners of war, to inspect, resupply, and improve living conditions onboard the prison ships, but neither side had the resources nor the will to prevent this humanitarian disaster,” according to the Mount Vernon digital encyclopedia.

On January 13, 1777, Washington wrote to British commander General William Howe, complaining about the treatment of prisoners. “You may call us rebels, and say that we deserve no better treatment. But, remember, my Lord, that supposing us rebels, we still have feelings as keen and sensible as Loyalists, and will, if forced to it, most assuredly retaliate upon those upon whom we look as the unjust invaders of our rights, liberties and properties.”

When the war ended in 1783, prisoners were freed, and the ships were abandoned.