

XIII THE SPIRIT OF '76

was stipulated by legislative enactment that any slave born in the state after July 4, 1804, would become a free citizen at a certain age (males, 25; females, 21) and not a slave. It was at best a half-hearted measure designed to meet the interests of the free white citizen rather than the black slave; on the eve of the Civil War there were still slaves in New Jersey.

As exemplified by the abolitionist movement, the Spirit of '76 diffused slowly but steadily throughout American society. It would take more than a generation for the principles of the Declaration of Independence to become articles of national faith and for the forces unleashed by the Revolution to find lasting expression in the institutions, ideals, and practices of the new republic. But the process begun during the years 1763-1783 proved inexorable. Looking back from the perspective of 1840, Ashbel Green, a member of the revolutionary generation in New Jersey, could scarcely comprehend the sweeping changes that had taken place during his lifetime (Doc. 13). The Revolution had not only given lasting identity to "the American, this new man," to use Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's famous phrase, but also had given birth to the United States, a new nation. And in its numerous legacies to subsequent generations, the American Revolution has not yet run its course.

1 Isaac Collins Announces the First Newspaper in New Jersey

[*New-Jersey Gazette*, December 5, 1777.]

Because theirs was the only major mainland colony without a newspaper prior to 1776, the residents of New Jersey had to rely on the New York City and Philadelphia press as a source of news and a forum for their views. The obvious advantages of an indigenous newspaper loomed even larger when the British army took New York in September 1776 and the Pennsylvania capital a year later. New Jersey was literally without any means of public mass communication. It was in part to facilitate the dissemination of information that Isaac Collins of Burlington undertook, with the support of Governor William Livingston and the legislature, to publish the state's first newspaper in December 1777. But in reality the *New-Jersey Gazette* was only the harbinger of an impending communications revolution. Shepard Kollock launched a second paper at Chatham in February 1779, and by 1787 newspapers were published in Elizabethtown, New Brunswick, Princeton, and Trenton. Why should a state without a newspaper in 1777 witness the appearance of four within a decade? The underlying cause of the newspaper boom was political. The government needed to import information to its citizens. Equally important, however, was the belief that an educated public was a prerequisite for republican

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self-government. And it was through newspapers that Jerseymen obtained information and exchanged opinions about the events and ideas of the day. The press had already become the hallmark of political liberty.

[December 5, 1777]

To enter into a minute Detail of the Advantages of a well-conducted NEWS-PAPER, would at any Time, be impertinent, but more especially at a Crisis which makes a quick Circulation of Intelligence particularly interesting to all the AMERICAN STATES. The Publisher, therefore, thinks it will be more to the Purpose, to communicate to the Publick, a brief Account of the Nature of his Plan, than to enter into a formal Proof of it's Utility, which he esteems little less than self-evident.

He proposes to print this GAZETTE once a Week,¹ to contain a faithful Account of remarkable Occurrences, whether foreign² or domestic; Materials for which he shall be amply furnished with, in Consequence of a general Correspondence he is establishing for that Purpose.

Such Proceedings of the Legislature, and Courts of Justice, as may conduce to the Benefit or Entertainment of his Readers, shall find Place in his Publications.³

ESSAYS, useful or entertaining, Schemes for the Advancement of TRADE, ARTS and MANUFACTURES, Proposals for Improvements in AGRICULTURE, and particularly in the Culture of HEMP and FLAX, will be inserted with Pleasure and Alacrity.

The Interests of RELIGION and LIBERTY, he shall ever think it his peculiar Duty to support; and, at the same Time, to treat with disregard the intemperate Effusions of factious Zealots, whether religious or political, as injurious to Virtue, and destructive of Civil Order. With great Care shall he reject every Proposition to make his Paper a Vehicle for the dark Purposes of private Malice, by propagating Calumnies against Individuals, wounding the Peace of Families, and inflaming the Minds of Men with Bitterness and Rancour against one another.⁴

In a Word, he will spare neither Cost or Pains to make his Paper as useful and entertaining as possible; and, while these Objects are steadily pursued, the Publisher will confidently rely upon the Generosity and Publick Spirit of the Gentlemen of this State, for their Countenance and Support, to such a useful Undertaking.⁵

1. Virtually all eighteenth century newspapers were weeklies; it was not until well into the nineteenth century that papers were published more frequently.

2. International news consisted of either extracts from the personal correspondence of Americans abroad or reprints from foreign papers.

3. As the government printer, Collins was frequently called upon to publish resolutions, messages, proclamations and other official material in his paper.

4. Newspapers in early America were not the public forums of today; the publisher arbitrarily decided what would appear in his paper. As a result, different papers in the same city usually differed markedly in the news and views offered their readers.

5. In reality the state government was responsible for the appearance of

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the *Gazette*. In a message to the assembly on October 11, 1777, Governor William Livingston noted the benefits that would derive from having a newspaper in the state and proposed that the legislature provide the necessary financial encouragement to launch such a venture. On November 5, a committee was appointed to confer with Collins—who was then the state printer charged with publishing statutes, legislative records, and other official documents—“concerning the Terms on which he will undertake to print and circulate” a newspaper. Apparently an agreement has been worked out in advance by Livingston and Collins, for that same day the Trenton printer agreed to commence publication if the government would subsidize an express rider from his shop to the nearest post office and underwrite 700 subscriptions until a like number of private subscribers could be obtained. The assemblymen, each of whom took out a subscription, promptly authorized the requisite appropriations. They obviously concurred wholeheartedly with the committee’s recommendation that “a well-conducted Gazette” would not only “greatly tend to promote useful Knowledge and Arts in the State” but also “by setting publick Events and Transactions in a true Point of View” would be a “Means of defeating [the] mischievous Designs” of the British who circulated false publications and rumors “purposely calculated to abuse and mislead the People.” *Votes and Proceedings, August 23-October 11, 1777* (Trenton, 1777), pp. 202-3; *Ibid., October 28, 1777-October 8, 1778* (Trenton, 1778), pp. 8-9.

2 “Cato” on the Characteristics of Representatives

[*New-Jersey Gazette*; January 7, 1778.]

The republican experiment in self-government made far more exacting demands of members of the legislature than had been imposed upon their colonial counterparts. In the first place, the state constitution of 1776 (see Sec. VII, Doc. 6) provided for annual elections instead of indefinite tenure. (Prior to the Revolution councilmen sat at the pleasure of the crown, while assemblymen served until the governor called for new elections.) Moreover, the effective operation of republican government required that the people be able to effectuate their will through elected representatives. Thus the legislators had to be men of virtue—that is, they must act in behalf of the common good rather than a particular constituency, class, or vested interest group, and be willing to subordinate personal considerations to the performance of their duties. In short, members of the legislature were to be public servants in the best sense of the term. Not surprisingly, they were extremely sensitive to public opinion and constituent concerns; conversely, citizens were quick to make their views known to their representatives through petitions and public writings. In the piece that follows, “Cato” offers for the benefit of the members of the lower house of