

V FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION

liberties (Doc. 6). Everyone knew, as "A Jersey Farmer" observed, that passive resistance was now passé; swords, not olive branches, would decide the imperial dispute (Doc. 2). By the fall of 1775 New Jersey resembled an armed camp (Doc. 12).

On another, more significant level, the popular front began to assume the role of a revolutionary organization. On May 23, 1775, the First Provincial Congress, attended by representatives from every county, met in Trenton to direct the political-turned-military contest. In addition to providing for the formation and supply of militia units, the Congress, the capstone of the extralegal political hierarchy that had developed in the province since the previous summer, issued a formal Association to unite Jerseymen in a common cause and solidify support for the rebellion (Doc. 1). During the succeeding months the popular front, with primary political control residing in local committees, with ease replaced the duly constituted governmental structure as the source of effective authority in the province (Doc. 3). Steps were taken to insure compliance with the directives of the Provincial Congress and suppress overt opposition to the insurrection through political persuasion (Doc. 9) and force of arms (Doc. 18). Subjected to public ostracism (Doc. 5) as well as physical abuse (Doc. 16), most dissenters came to regard prudence as the better part of valor (Doc. 17).

But far more important than the preparation for and direction of armed resistance was the larger issue of the ultimate course of the rebellion. With the passage of time, the revolt assumed a life and momentum of its own; it became increasingly difficult for supporters of the rebellion to deny the logic of their convictions and conduct. A former friend of the royal government like Charles Pettit felt his political sentiments increasingly incompatible with his privileged position as provincial surrogate and clerk of the council (Doc. 8). Although all signs pointed toward a war for independence, even the most ardent Whigs were reluctant to confront the momentous issue openly or with much enthusiasm. When activist John De Hart resigned his seat in the Continental Congress for personal reasons, he did so with regret and apprehension at the steady escalation of the imperial dispute (Doc. 11). And while "Lycurgus" clearly favored secession from the empire, he could only broach the subject circuitously (Doc. 15). Governor William Franklin, who saw which way the rebellion was going, could only stand by helplessly as British authority rapidly eroded (Doc. 7). While the assembly (Doc. 13) dismissed the fears of independence felt by some residents (Doc. 10), defenders of the royal regime knew well that New Jersey was on the eve of a revolution (Doc. 14).

1 The New Jersey Provincial Association

[*PCCS Minutes*, pp. 176-77.]

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The creation of a Provincial Congress marked a watershed in the course of the rebellion in New Jersey. Its origin lay in the crisis created by the skirmish at Lexington Green. Acting upon the April 24 suggestion of a Princeton town meeting that a provincial congress be established, the Provincial Committee of Correspondence, concerned by the "alarming and very extraordinary conduct of the British Ministry" and the "several acts of hostility that have been actually commenced," on May 2 called upon the counties to appoint delegates to attend a colony-wide convention to be held in Trenton on May 23 "in order to consider of and determine such matters as may then and there come before them." The eighty-five men who attended the historic gathering of the First Provincial Congress moved quickly beyond emergency measures to assume the mantle of legitimate governmental authority in the colony. The extralegal political apparatus in New Jersey had been completed; a revolutionary government was taking shape. That fact was not lost on Jerseymen who, with the issuance of the Provincial Association, were forced to decide where their primary allegiance lay. Many faced a difficult decision: to sign the Association was to commit treason, but to refuse to sign would be to incur the wrath of the local committee. Still, as the Association makes clear, the purpose of the rebellion was defense of political liberties and not independence.

May 31, 1775

We, the subscribers, freeholders and inhabitants of the Township of _____ in the County of _____ and Province of New Jersey, having long viewed with concern the avowed design of the Ministry of Great Britain to raise a revenue in America; being deeply affected with the cruel hostilities already commenced in the Massachusetts Bay for carrying that arbitrary design into execution; convinced that the preservation of the rights and privileges of America depends, under God, on the firm union of its inhabitants; do, with hearts abhorring slavery, and ardently wishing for a reconciliation with our parent state on constitutional principles, solemnly associate and resolve, under the sacred ties of virtue, honor and love to our Country, that we will personally, and as far as our influence extends, endeavour to support and carry into execution whatever measures may be recommended by the Continental and our Provincial Congress, for defending our Constitution, and preserving the same inviolate.

We do also further associate and agree, as far as shall be consistent with the measures adopted for the preservation of American freedom, to support the magistrates and other civil officers in the execution of their duty, agreeable to the laws of this Colony; and to observe the directions of our Committee, acting according to the Resolutions of the aforesaid Continental and Provincial Congresses; firmly determined, by all means in our power, to guard against those disorders and confusions to which the peculiar circumstances of the times may expose us.