In writing candidly about the rebellion to his brother William, a career soldier in the British army with the rank of colonel, Attorney General Cortlandt Skinner took a grievous risk. During the first week in January 1776 the letter, along with several communications written by Governor William Franklin, was intercepted by the rebel militia Colonel William Alexander (Lord Stirling). As soon as Skinner learned of the seizure, he fled the province and took refuge on board a British warship in New York Harbor, leaving behind his wife and thirteen children. His hurried flight proved wise, for the provocative contents of the letter soon prompted an order for his arrest. (For Skinner’s career as a Loyalist, see Sec. VIII, Doc. 18.) As with so many men, the attorney general and Speaker of the assembly could comprehend the rebellion only as irrational behavior by persons on either side of the ocean. To his mind, greedy merchants seeking to evade customs duties and paranoid Presbyterian bigots hoping to destroy the Church of England were fueling the fires of insurrection in America; at the same time, blunderers in the British ministry and military were proving inept in efforts to quell the disturbances. Through it all Skinner, like Daniel Coxe (see Doc. 4), most feared for his personal safety.

Dear Brother:

I have not had the pleasure of receiving a letter from you for a long time; whether you have written and they have miscarried, or what has happened, I know not; only this I know, that I have not had the happiness of a line from you this troublesome summer. I have always fondly, I may say foolishly, hoped that the unnatural dispute now subsisting would have an amicable conclusion. I find myself sadly disappointed. The tea duty began the controversy; it has branched out into divers others, and now the contest is for dominion. For the rise of the dispute we are indebted to smugglers; for the present state of it, to the pride, ambition, and interest of those who, enemies to the ecclesiastical establishment of their country, have long plotted, and to others who have become of consequence in the struggle. They who began had their interest in view, and feared the ruin of their smuggling; here they, I believe, were willing to leave the dispute. The others, with deeper views, keep it up, and, building on the foundation, are attempting a superstructure (a republick) that will deluge this country in blood. This is not new. All history, as well as our own, shows great convulsions, rebellions and revolutions from mad enthusiasm and designing men; and the last spring up like mushrooms. We are now upon the eve, I may say, have actually begun a revolution. The Congress are our King, Lords, and Commons. They have taken Canada, with the consent of its grateful inhabitants; they block up the Royal army in Boston; they say they have secured the Indians; have appointed an Admiral; are fitting out a fleet, and are universally obeyed. Is

December, 1775
NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

this, or is it not independency? They say it is not; and we must believe even against
our senses. An edict, manifesto, or what you may please to call it, has been issued
from the Congress; in which they say, We have taken into consideration a
proclamation issued by the Court of St. James's; meaning the late Royal
Proclamation. You will soon see it. I fear bad consequences will attend the mistaken
people who are so obstinately loyal as to favour the Royal cause. Where or what will
be the end, I know not. The mistakes of Generals and Admirals, and the strange
security in sending succours, ammunition, &c., to this country, amazes me, while
success here in every mad measure vexes me. The saints say Heaven is on their side; I
rather think the old saying more applicable, "The devil is kind to young beginners."
We must have in every war a campaign, at least, of blunders. This may be called so,
from the ill-timed march to Lexington to the losing of Canada. Another year may set
us right; but not, if we only succour Boston. A few regiments and fleets to different
Provinces will set us right; at least bring us to our senses, and support the friends of
Government. But I have said enough on this disagreeable subject; you will know
every thing from the papers, though, now Rivington is suppressed, you can hear
only one side of the question.

I informed you in my last that I had another son, and that I had called him
James. I can now only tell you that all my family, with your other friends and
connexion, are well, except my wife, whose present weakness alarms me. She is now
tolerably well, but so often otherwise, that I cannot say she has any thing like
established health. She presents her love to you and your little girl, with the warmest
wishes for both your happiness. I have not received a letter for a long time from Will,
though I have heard of him, and that very pleasingly. I beg you will direct him to
write to me, but caution him against political matters; few letters come to us
unopened, and it may be of fatal consequence to me.[illegible] wrote lately; it
came safe, but had it fallen into the hands of the Committee, I should, as well as his
brother, have felt, before we heard of it. Give my love and their mother's to them
both, and as much as I long to hear from them and you, write cautiously, and in a
way that can do me no harm. I fear a letter from Captain Kearny. I know how he
will write; if, therefore, you see him, tell him of my fears. I wish to hear from you and
all my friends, but they must avoid politicks, unless some very safe person, not an
officer, or in the least connected with Government, and above all a man of honour
should be the bearer. Make my compliments to Mr. Watts, to whom I am much
obliged for his kind mentioning of my children. Remember me to Captain Skinner,
who I think writes to nobody here, but now and then to his wife. Give my love to my
children.

I am, with the greatest affection, your brother,
CORTLANDT SKINNER

1. The exact date of the letter is unknown, but it was written after action
taken by the Continental Congress on December 6 and, perhaps, 22 (see note
2). The date of its capture by the rebels (see note 5) would indicate that it was
written toward the end of the month.

2. It is not certain to whom Skinner is referring. On September 2, General
George Washington instructed Colonel John Glover of Marblehead,
Massachusetts, to arm fishing boats to serve as a preliminary "navy." On December 22, Congress named Esek Hopkins of Rhode Island commodore of the fleet of four naval vessels it had ordered constructed in October. If Skinner is referring to Hopkins as the "admiral," then the letter was written near the end of December.

3. On August 23 George III issued a formal proclamation declaring the American colonies to be in a state of rebellion and calling for the suppression of the same; on December 6 the Continental Congress responded to the proclamation by avowing loyalty to the king but disavowing allegiance to Parliament.

4. Rivington's New-York Gazetteer ... the principal organ of Loyalist sentiment, had been destroyed by rebels in November. See Sec. IV, Doc. 5, note 1.

5. The rebels routinely rifled the mail of suspected Loyalists; Skinner had no idea that his remarks would prove prophetic, that the seizure of this very letter would lead to his exile.

6. Michael Kearny (1725-1797) who settled as a planter in Morris County in 1763 after service in the Royal Navy during which time he attained the rank of captain. The Skinner and Kearny families of Perth Amboy were related by blood, marriage, and economic interest.

7. John Watts, wealthy New York City merchant and councilman, who was forced to flee to Britain in May 1775. Watts was related to the Kearny and Skinner families by marriage.

8. John Skinner (?-1797), brother of Cortlandt and William, was a captain in the British army.

15 "Lycurgus" on Independence

[New-York Journal; or, the General Advertiser, December 21, 1775.]

As with Tories who forthrightly denounced the rebellion, Whigs who boldly advocated independence did so at great risk. Promoting resistance, even rebellion, was quite different from advocating treason. Besides, most Jersey Whigs were opposed to secession in late 1775; premature talk of independence might drive moderates into the crown's camp. The following essay is the first public advocacy of American independence by a resident of New Jersey. The circuituous, restrained language of the statement stands in marked contrast to the more belligerent, unequivocal productions appearing in some other colonies. But, however delicately, the author made his point. Employing a favorite rhetorical device of the day, "Lycurgus" broached the controversial topic of independence by posing a series of seemingly innocent questions, the answers to which were all too obvious. Substantively, the unidentified writer

167