

V FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION

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

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

anticipated the most telling argument advanced by Thomas Paine six weeks later in *Common Sense*: there was little to be gained from membership in the British Empire.

New-Jersey, Dec. 4, 1775

Mr. Holt:¹

I have lately seen in the public papers an instruction from the House of Representatives in Pennsylvania to their Delegates in Congress, which to me appeared very odd, and even inconsistent. They very properly observe, at first, that *the mode of executing their trust may be so diversified in the course of their deliberations that 'tis scarcely possible to give particular instructions respecting it.* And yet in a few minutes they so see into futurity, as to venture to give one instruction very peremptorily, respecting a *separation* from our *Mother country.*² 'Tis not easy to understand what they may precisely mean by such a separation. Without asserting anything I would take the liberty to ask a few questions. There can surely be no hurt in querying a little. I would therefore ask, Are they certain that Great-Britain cannot, or will not, in the course of the year, treat us in such a manner, as to forfeit all right to our dependance upon them? Are they sure, that if Great-Britain does so, it will still be best, at all adventures, to put our necks into their yoke? Are they sure, that Britain will not call in foreign aid, so as to oblige us also to do the same? Are they sure, that if Britain should thus oblige us to call in foreign aid, we should not be as much under obligation to our new allies, as to Britain? Are they sure, that if we submit to British government, they will not, as heretofore, try to fill all places of trust and profit with their creatures, so as by degrees entirely to bring us under?³ Are they sure, that such a resolution in the province of Pennsylvania, will not encourage Britain, and make them rise in their demand upon us, since they may expect, from such an instruction, that we should submit to anything rather than a separation from them? Are they sure, that if all the other Colonies should agree in a form of government, it would be best for *their* delegates to reject it, and stand out? Was there any need of mentioning the change of the government in their own province? Could there be any the least ground for a suspicion of that, let our separation from our mother-country be as it would? Is this instruction agreeable to the wisdom and prudence that has generally appeared in the Assembly of that province? Are they sure, 'tis best America should not be independent as to government, and that several nations, suppose Britain, Holland, France and Spain, should have equal advantage of our trade, and they should all be bound to maintain our independency in other respects? Suppose that Britain should have all the advantage of our trade, is not that all that can really be beneficial to them? May there not be a proper treaty for Britain's having the advantage of our trade, without being any other way under their government? Have we not already tasted too much of their legislative power, ever to let them have the advantage in their hands again? Is not the advantage of our trade, regulated by a proper treaty, all that Britain has a right to expect or desire, and all that we have a right to grant?

LYCURGUS⁴

1. John Holt, publisher of the radical *New-York Journal*.

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2. In November 1775 the Pennsylvania assembly instructed its congressional delegation to work toward reconciliation with Great Britain and oppose secession from the empire.

3. The only Briton holding appointive office in New Jersey was Chief Justice Frederick Smyth.

4. Identity of author unknown. The original Lycurgus founded the Spartan constitution and social and military systems; hence he was the man responsible for the "good order" which they created.

16 Thomas Randolph Tarr'd and Feathered

[*New-York Journal; or, General Advertiser*, December 28, 1775.]

Acts of physical violence were rare in New Jersey, thanks to the moderation of popular leaders and the wide support given to the resistance movement. The fate of Thomas Randolph described below is the only known account of tarring and feathering in the province during the prerevolutionary decade. Normally the prospect or threat of violence was sufficient to cool the ardor of those who openly opposed the congresses and committees.

The 6th Dec. at Quibble Town,¹ Middlesex County, Piscataqua² Township, N. Jersey, Thomas Randolph, Cooper, Who had publickly proved himself an enemy to his country, by reviling and using his utmost endeavours to oppose the proceedings of the Continental and Provincial Conventions and Committees, in defence of their rights and liberties; and he being judg'd a person of not consequence enough for a severer punishment, was order'd to be stripp'd naked, well coat'd with tar and feathers and carried in a waggon publickly round the town— which punishment was accordingly inflict'd; and as he soon became duly sensible of his offence, for which he earnestly begg'd pardon, and promised to atone as far as he was able, by a contrary behaviour for the future, he was released and suffer'd to return to his house, in less than half an hour. The whole was conducted with that regularity and decorum, that ought to be observ'd in all public punishments.

1. Now New Market.
2. Piscataway.