

V FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION

2 “A Jersey Farmer” on Securing the Rights of Englishmen

[*Pennsylvania Journal; and the Weekly Advertiser*, June 14, 1775.]

At Runnymede in 1215, King John of England agreed to accept the Magna Carta (Great Charter) drawn up by a group of feudal barons who, by the terms of the document, hoped to insure their rights under their feudal contract with the king. Provisions for enforcement of the charter by force if necessary (the section 64 referred to below) were also made. The chief significance of the document at the time was the assertion of the supremacy of law over the monarch; in time the charter became a cornerstone of English constitutionalism. That “A Jersey Farmer” would invoke the memory and precedent of Magna Carta to rally support behind the Second Continental Congress illustrates the degree to which the Americans were imbued with the history and traditions of the mother country in striving to preserve their rights as Englishmen.

[June 14, 1775]

Friends and Fellow-Subjects,

How fashionable soever might have been the doctrine of *Passive Obedience* and *Non-Resistance* in those dark times of ignorance and barbarism, when the laity had no more instruction than to repeat the Lord’s Prayer, nor the clergy any more reading than would save them from hanging; it is, in this lettered and enlightened age, so generally exploded, that save a few Tories, who are pensioned out of their consciences, or a few Gowns and Cassocks, who are looking for an American mitre,¹ no man is fond of broaching so gross an absurdity. It is certainly the voice of unbiassed, uncorrupted reason, that whatever one man has a right to enjoy, no other man has a right to take from him; and that consequently the first has an undoubted right to repel the invasion of the latter. And what does it matter whether this invasion is made under the character of King, Highway-man, or Robber; since it is not from the person of the invader, but from the nature of the invasion itself, that the injury receives its complexion, and on which the right of the resistance is founded? And as this is the undoubted right of all mankind, it is, with respect to Englishmen, reduced to absolute certainty, by a most memorable clause in the great Charter, whereby four out of twenty-five Barons may shew the King *his miscarriage*, and on his not *amending* it, may, with the residue of the twenty-five and commonalty, redress themselves by force. It is true the Americans have no Barons to *shew the King his miscarriage*; but the Barons appointed for that purpose by Magna Charta being thereto appointed as representatives of the people aggrieved, it is evident, from the nature of our local circumstances, that we must have a right to appoint, in the room of such Barons, a representation for the same purpose; and that such representatives must have the same right to lay our grievances before the Throne, and the aggrieved in default of redress by the Prince, have a right, in the same manner, to redress themselves. In the light of this representation, I consider the Continental Congress,

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being expressly chosen to present our grievances to his Majesty, and to supplicate him to remove our complaints. To this purpose they are undoubtedly the Barons of North-America, on whom the united confederated Colonies depend for counsel and protection, agreeable to the security granted to the subject by the 64th Section of Magna Charta above referred to, and which, it being probably in a few of your hands, I chuse to give you at large.

[Paragraph quoting the 64th section of Magna Carta deleted.]

This, my Countrymen, is the security granted to you and me, and by this are confirmed all the Rights and Privileges of an English subject, and which the present Administration seem determined to destroy. It may indeed be said, that we do not belong to the Massachusetts Bay, and that New-Jersey is not attacked. But can you be so supine as to suppose that you will continue to enjoy those estimable rights of Magna Charta, when other Colonies are bereft of them; and that the Massachusetts is the only Colony to be punished? Have not they done more for the parent state than any Colony on the continent? Did they not, the war before last, with very little assistance, take Cape-Breton,² the Dunkirk of North-America, the giving up of which procured a peace for the Mother Country? Did they not the last war³ send seven thousand troops into the field, under the King's General, until the final conquest of Canada? Notwithstanding all this, you see their capital blocked up; their charter mutilated, and an armed force ready to execute the arbitrary measures of the minister, who covers himself under a purchased majority in Parliament. Hostilities being actually begun in the Massachusetts,⁴ you cannot expect to fare better than your Sister Colony. Your trade is already restrained,⁵ and you are daily to expect open violence to enforce unconstitutional taxation. Thus we have lived to see our most sacred Rights daringly invaded; but we will not live to see them destroyed. The wound by which our Liberty falls ought first to reach our hearts; and the rich torrents of our blood be shed as a libation on the pile of expiring freedom.

The power of the People can never be lost or impaired, unless they are wanting to themselves; what they could once do, they can and ought to do now. Let us, therefore, cordially unite under the Continental Congress, and look to them as the English formerly did to their barons, and I am confident, in so good a cause, we shall have the protection of Heaven which is the sincere desire, and prayer of

A JERSEY FARMER

1. That is, the clergy of the Church of England who favored the creation of an Anglican bishopric in America.

2. King George's War (1740-1748), the North American phase of the War of the Austrian Succession, saw an English expeditionary force, organized by Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts and commanded by William Pepperel of the same colony, take the key French fortress of Louisburg on Cape Breton Island in 1745.

3. The French and Indian War, 1754-1763.

4. The author is referring to the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, but three days after the appearance of the letter the first pitched battle between British and American Forces occurred on Bunker (Breed's) Hill.

5. An attempt to turn the boycott of British goods against the Americans,

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the New England Restraining Act of March 30, 1775, forbade the New England colonies to trade outside the empire. On April 13 Parliament extended the provisions of the act to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina when it was learned that they had entered into the Association.

3 Minutes of the Shrewsbury Township Committee

[The Minutes for the period June 19—September 2, 1775 are located in the American Revolution Manuscripts of the Monmouth County Historical Association; those for October 6, 1775 to May 6, 1776 are to be found in the East Jersey Manuscripts, 26, New Jersey Historical Society.]

The success or failure of the resistance movement ultimately depended upon the effectiveness of the local committees of inspection. The minutes of the Shrewsbury, Monmouth County, committee are the most comprehensive record available of the activities of a local revolutionary organization in New Jersey. Although the committeemen faced special problems because of the sizable Quaker population in the community, their duties were typical of those performed by committees throughout the province. Of special significance is the wide range of tasks which fell to the committee; with the power of legislation, adjudication, investigation, and enforcement, the vigilante organization truly exercised the essential functions of government.

[19 June 1775—29 February 1776]

[June 19, 1775] In Consequence of an Advertisement signed by Josiah Holmes Chairman, the following Committee Men for the Township of Shrewsbury mett at the House of Mr. Shaw to put into execution the resolutions of the Province Congress of New Jersey as far as relates to themselves.

Josiah Holmes	Daniel Hendrickson
John Little	Nicholas Vanbrunt
Corn[elius] Lane	Samuel Breese
Corn[elius] Vanderveer	Garrat Longstreet
David Knott	Samuel Longstreet
Benja[min] Dennis	Thomas Morford

They unanimously upon motion placed Josiah Holmes in the Chair & Voted Samuel Breese Clerk.¹