

3 The Salem County Petition to the Provincial Congress on Suffrage Reform

[Revolutionary War Documents, 156, New Jersey State Library.]

The democratization of politics was an important by-product of the attempt by popular leaders to increase support for the resistance movement by permitting persons normally excluded from political activity to participate in mass meetings and serve on local committees. In August 1775 the Provincial Congress stipulated that in the future congressmen could be elected only by those "qualified to vote for Representatives in the General Assembly." (Only "freeholders" who owned a certain amount of land, usually fifty acres, or personal property worth at least £50 sterling were eligible to vote for legislators.) This retreat from the "inhabitants" suffrage that had previously characterized extralegal elections was roundly condemned by men determined to play a role in the politics of their communities. Disenfranchisement seems to have been especially widespread in rural south Jersey, perhaps because of the presence of a large number of farm laborers in the region. In any event, Salem County figured prominently in the drive to broaden the suffrage. In October 1775 the Salem representatives in the Provincial Congress moved that the vote be extended to "householders" or "reputable single men" who had personal estates worth at least £50 proclamation and had been residents of a county for one year prior to an election. Tabled by a single vote, the motion later became the basis for the new liberalized election law adopted on February 16, 1776. The broadening of the franchise resulted in part from the continued pressure exerted by disenfranchised men such as those who signed the following petition. The remonstrance was probably circulated in late January and early February 1776; it was presented to the Congress in New Brunswick on February 9.

[February 1776]

The Remembrance of the Freemen of Salem County denied the Right of Election by a Resolve of the late Convention of said province Sheweth

That as we neither wish nor expect our present inactive State is unobserved & think it our duty to offer the following Arguments in Justification of our Conduct, fully persuaded that as they are dictated by the Love of our Country and the Rights of Man Kind they will [torn] with every unprejudiced mind as with [torn]. In an Early period of the present glorious Struggle we took Arms, devoting both our time and property to the Acquirement of Military knowledge. When called on to contribute both by pecuniary and personall service (Convinced of the Justice and importance of the cause) we cheerfully Obeyed the summons. But how great the disappointment when we found that whilst we were expending our time and Money with a View of repelling the invaders of our Liberties we were deprived of the priviledges we contended for by an Act of the late provincial Congress Consisting of the very Men we had intrusted as the Guardians of our Rights. Born to the same

VI EMPIRE OR INDEPENDENCE

privileges with the rest of Mankind we have a Right to the free Exercise of them until divested thereof by some Act of our own, but that ever any people divested them[selves] of their Right of Representation is an absurdity too trifling for the [torn] of thought. We cannot conceive the wise Author of Our Existance ever de[signed?] that a certain quantity of the Earth on which we tread should be annexed to Man to Compleat his dignity and fit him for society. Was the sole design of Government either security of Land, or Money, the possession of either or both these would be the only necessary qualification for its members. But we apprehend the benign intentions of a well regulated Government extend to the security of [a] much more valuable possession—The Rights and privileges of Freemen—for the defence of which every kind of property and even Life itself have been Liberally expended. We ask, what we have in the present state of Affairs to induce us to spill our Blood? If we adopt the measures now pursuing in this province we Establish an usurpation of Every [illegible] with that [illegible] endeavoring to destroy. In defence of them we armed ourselves; when a prospect of securing them Ceases our Military Operations may be justly deemed by the World A Rapacious thirst of Wantonly shedding Human Blood.

[Forty-two signatures affixed.]

4 Joseph Brearley to David Brearley

[Department of Defense Records, 2284, New Jersey State Library.]

To not a few Jerseymen the debate over the proper constitutional relationship between Britain and America became academic after the outbreak of warfare; in the aftermath of Lexington and Concord men such as the Brearley brothers rushed to take up arms in defense of their homes as well as their liberties—if not for independence. At the time the following testimony of hardship and determination was written, Joseph (1742-1805) was serving as a captain in the Second New Jersey Regiment of the Continental Line; this regiment was a part of the Northern Army, commanded first by General David Wooster and then by General John Thomas, that attempted unsuccessfully to take the British garrisons at Montreal and Quebec in May 1776. (The Northern Army consisted of remnants of and reinforcements to the force that had earlier failed in the same mission in November and December 1775.) Joseph was promoted to major in 1777 and served for the rest of the war as an aide to General George Washington. David (1745-1790) was also a captain in the Second New Jersey, eventually rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He later enjoyed a successful political career, holding the positions of chief justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court (1779-1789) and delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787.