

## NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

came on July 2 with the adoption of Richard Henry Lee's famous independence motion; two days later the former British North American colonies from New Hampshire to Georgia announced themselves to the world as "free and Independent States." America had chosen independence over empire.

But even as Jerseymen celebrated the birth of the nation (Doc. 8), a sense of urgency and uncertainty began to permeate the new state. After all, the road to independence was only the preliminary to the more difficult journey ahead. Whether the transformation from dependent colonies to independent states was transitory or permanent would depend upon the ability of Americans to meet unprecedented military and political exigencies. The awesome military might of a Britain determined to retain sovereignty in America, which caused some men to be apprehensive about the future of the new republic (Doc. 7), prompted others of lesser faith to join the British (Doc. 9). But the larger problem was political. The immediate success of the experiment in independence would ultimately depend upon the ability of the revolutionary regime to stifle opposition and assert its authority (Doc. 10) and the willingness of the citizenry to subordinate personal interests to the general welfare (Doc. 12); in the long run it rested on the ability of the new state government to maintain effective governance amid the throes of civil war and revolution (Doc. 13).

The Declaration of Independence, at base an expression of faith in the ability of man to govern himself, bespoke the Spirit of '76. The problems confronting the fledgling nation were of such magnitude that Abraham Clark, a signer of the immortal declaration, might well have wondered whether the "self-evident truths" for which his fellow Jerseymen had pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor would prove illusory or become the cornerstone of an American republic (Doc. 11). The course of the War for American Independence would answer that momentous question.

### 1 John Stevens to Governor William Franklin

[Stevens Family Papers, New Jersey Historical Society.]

The rationale behind the protest-independence movement at the provincial and intercolonial or "national" levels is relatively easy to determine; much more difficult to ascertain are the reasons why individual citizens made the fateful decision for either empire or independence. Despite characteristics that theoretically should have been translated into Loyalism — East Jersey proprietor, wealthy merchant, member of the politically conservative Perth Amboy Group, councilman (1762-1776), and devout Anglican — John Stevens (1715-1792) cast his lot with America. Why? Certainly nationalism — his identity as an American — colored his thinking. And constitutional principles, the failure of reconciliation, and the determination of Britain to achieve a military solution

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in America likewise played a part in the decision. But there can also be no doubt that the political stance of the old family patriarch was heavily influenced by the staunch Whiggism of his sons, John, Jr., and Richard, and his brother-in-law, William Alexander, the self-styled Lord Stirling. Whatever the reasons, John Stevens reluctantly, albeit with resolve, joined the rebellion. (His resignation came as no surprise to Governor William Franklin, who had long regarded Stevens as an opportunistic trimmer whose loyalty was questionable.)

June 1776

Sir

It is with the greatest concern I see the dispute between Great Britain and these Colonys Arisen to the present alarming Situation of Both Countrys. While I had hopes of an Accommodation of our unhappy Controversy, I was unwilling to quit a Station which enabled me to be serviceable to my Country, but the Continuation of Hostilities by The British Ministry and the large Armament of Foreign Troops Daily expected to invest our Country, leaves me no longer room to doubt that an intire Submission of These Colonys with a view of Internal Taxation is their Ultimate Object. Your Excellency will not wonder I should prefer the duty I owe my Native Country to any other Consideration. I therefore beg leave to resign my Seat at the Council Board. I am

Your Excellencys Most  
Obedient Humble Servt  
JOHN STEVENS

## 2 A Loyalist Petition to the Provincial Congress Against Independence

[*New-York Gazette; and the Weekly Mercury*, June 24, 1776; manuscript copy in the Frederick Smyth Papers, American Philosophical Society Library.]

The division of opinion in New Jersey on the issue of independence was reflected in the petitions on the topic submitted in June to the Provincial Congress, now generally recognized as the primary governing body in the colony. Twelve petitions supported the formation of a new government in accordance with the May 15 resolution of the Continental Congress (but only one explicitly advocated independence) while seven memorials opposed separation. In addition, a petition allegedly signed by "upwards of 900 Freeholders" appeared in the *New-York Gazette* in the form of an open letter to the congressmen. This document, which appears below, indicates the tenacity with which many