

7 Abraham Clark to Elias Dayton

[Dreer Collection, Signers, 1:112, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.]

In some ways the declaration of independence could not have come at a better time; in other ways it could not have been made at a less propitious moment. One wonders what went through the minds of congressmen like Abraham Clark, who voted for Richard Henry Lee's independence resolution on July 2 and prepared to vote for Thomas Jefferson's declaration on the fourth—all the while knowing not only that the American assault on Quebec in May had resulted in a rout and that the rebels had recently arrived at Fort Ticonderoga in utter disarray, but also that General Sir William Howe had landed on Staten Island on July 2 with nearly 10,000 men bent upon taking strategic New York City. A rather late participant in the protest-independence movement, Clark (1726-1794) of Elizabethtown—farmer, surveyor, and former clerk of the assembly and high sheriff of Essex County—served in the Provincial Congress (1775-1776) prior to being sent to Philadelphia to vote for secession in June 1776 (see Doc. 5). Elias Dayton (1737-1807), Elizabethtown merchant and veteran of service with the New Jersey Blues in the French and Indian War, understood Clark's apprehensions about the political decisions made in Philadelphia. In July 1776 Dayton was serving as colonel of the Third Battalion of New Jersey forces operating in upper New York.

Phila. July 4th, 1776

My Dear friend,

Our Seeming bad Success in Canada, I dare say gives you great uneasiness. In times of danger, and under misfortune true Courage and Magnanimity can only be Ascertained. In the Course of Such a War we must expect some Losses. We are told a Panick Seized the Army. If so it hath not reached the Senate.¹ At the Time our Forces in Canada were retreating before a Victorious Army, while Gen[era]l Howe with a Large Armament is Advancing towards N[ew] York, Our Congress Resolved to Declare the United Colonies *Free and independent States*. A Declaration for this purpose, I expect, will this day pass Congress. It is nearly gone through, after which it will be Proclaimed with all the State and Solemnity circumstances will admit. It is gone so far that we must now be a free independent State, or a Conquered Country.

I can readily guess at your feelings upon hearing that Gen[era]l Howe with 130 Transports are between N[ew] York & the Hook.² This was our last acc[oun]t; no express hath come in this morning. All seems uncertainty where they will land. I assure you I dont feel quite reconciled at being here and the Enemy at my Door at home. All reports Agree that New Jersey is all in motion to meet the Enemy in Case they pay our Province a Visit, or to Assist N[ew] York as Occasion may require. Had Gen[era]l Howe Landed his forces as soon as he Arrived he might have Carried all before him. Possibly while I am Writing this he may be reaping the Fruits of a Victory. This seems now to be a trying season, but that indulgent Father who hath

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hitherto Preserved us will I trust Appear for our help, and prevent our being Crushed; if otherwise his Will be done.

I have no Particular News more to Communicate. No news from your family to send. I wrote you the day before I left home. I am Among a Consistory of Kings as our Enemy says. I assure you Sir, Our Congress is An August Assembly, and can they support the Declaration now on the Anvil, they will be the greatest Assembly on Earth.

As I am not Able to Communicate to you any thing but what the Public Papers will Announce, you will readily perceive I mean to let you know you are not forgot by me. Tho' I address myself to you Sir, yet I mean to include my much esteemed friend Mr. Caldwell³ in it.

We are now Sir embarked on a most Tempestuous Sea, Life very uncertain, Seeming dangers Scattered thick Around us, Plots Against the Military, and it is Whispered, Against the Senate. Let us prepare for the Worst. We can Die here but once may al[1] our Business, all our purposes & pursuits tend to fit us for that important event.

I am Dr. Sir
Yours & Mr. Caldwell's most Obedient & Hum. Servt.
ABRA. CLARK

1. That is, the Continental Congress.
2. Sandy Hook.
3. The Reverend James Caldwell (1734-1781), politically active pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Elizabethtown, who was serving in July 1776 as the chaplain of New Jersey's Continental Line and thus was in camp with Colonel Dayton. Among his Whig communicants in Elizabethtown were the Dayton and Boudinot families, Abraham Clark, William Livingston, Stephen Crane, and Francis Barber.

8 Princeton and Trenton Celebrate American Independence

[*Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet; or, the General Advertiser*, July 15, 1776.]

On July 5 John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, sent a copy of the Declaration of Independence to the New Jersey Congress along with a request that it be proclaimed and publicized "in such a Way and Manner as you shall judge best." But for reasons unknown the Congress delayed official endorsement of the Declaration until July 18, at which time it was announced: "Whereas, the Honorable Continental Congress had declared the United