

VII

From Colony to State

The nearly two-year-old battle for men's minds in New Jersey was essentially over by June 1776. The rush of events and rising pressures made it impossible to avoid the issue of independence any longer and to postpone a personal declaration of allegiance. There was a war going on, and sentiment in the Continental Congress ran strongly in favor of independence. The time for decision was at hand. The prospect of independence brought about a resurgence of Loyalist opposition to separation (Doc. 2). Even the most ardent Whigs dreaded the bloody civil war that would inevitably follow an attempt to secede from the empire and feared the dangers of an experiment in republican government (Doc. 3). Nonetheless, when the chips were down most Jerseymen decided to cast their lot with their homeland (Doc. 1) and support the bold attempt to establish a new political order in America.

The independence-minded members of the newly elected Third Provincial Congress, which convened in Burlington on June 10, gave concrete expression to the prevailing mood of the province. As the first major order of business, the delegates ordered the arrest of Governor William Franklin, declared him "an enemy to the liberties of this country," and remanded the chief representative of the crown in the colony to the Continental Congress which subsequently exiled him to confinement in Connecticut (Doc. 4). Now that British authority had literally been removed from New Jersey, the Provincial Congress on June 21 voted to form a new government pursuant to the Continental Congress resolution of May 15. The result was the state constitution of July 2 (Doc. 6). All that remained was a formal declaration of independence, and with that in mind the Provincial Congress had dispatched a new congressional delegation — Abraham Clark, John Hart, Francis Hopkinson, Richard Stockton, and John Witherspoon — to Philadelphia to join representatives from the other colonies in "declaring the United Colonies independent of Great Britain" (Doc. 5). The historic decision

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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