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From Resistance to Rebellion

As Daniel Coxe assessed the state of Anglo-American affairs on July 4, 1775, he, like other reflective Jerseymen, could scarcely fathom the political changes of the previous decade (Doc. 4). In July 1765 opposition to the Stamp Act was just beginning; by July 1775 that resistance had become armed rebellion. And as he looked to the future, Coxe could not foresee that the rebellion would soon become a revolution and that exactly one year hence his worst fears would find expression in the Declaration of Independence.

During the summer and fall of 1775 the rebellion took shape. The bloody clashes between American and British soldiers on battlefields from Bunker (Breed's) Hill to Quebec dispelled any doubts about the nature of the contest between the colonies and the mother country. The Continental Congress abandoned its more deliberative function and assumed active direction of the insurrection. The Congress raised an official American army under the command of George Washington (June), issued a formal declaration of war against Great Britain (July), ordered the construction of a navy (October), appointed a special committee to conduct relations with foreign powers (November). Simultaneously the Provincial Congresses and local committees usurped ever greater governing powers in the individual colonies. The British government responded in kind. On August 23 George III officially proclaimed the American colonies to be in a state of rebellion, and in succeeding months the government made plans to suppress the revolt. To men on either side of the Atlantic the only real question now was whether the outcome of the contest would be reconciliation or independence.

In New Jersey, as elsewhere, the transition from resistance to rebellion developed on several planes. On one level steps were taken to repel the incursions of the British army. Military preparations proceeded apace, thanks to the eagerness of ordinary citizens to take to the field in defense of American

V FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION

liberties (Doc. 6). Everyone knew, as "A Jersey Farmer" observed, that passive resistance was now passé; swords, not olive branches, would decide the imperial dispute (Doc. 2). By the fall of 1775 New Jersey resembled an armed camp (Doc. 12).

On another, more significant level, the popular front began to assume the role of a revolutionary organization. On May 23, 1775, the First Provincial Congress, attended by representatives from every county, met in Trenton to direct the political-turned-military contest. In addition to providing for the formation and supply of militia units, the Congress, the capstone of the extralegal political hierarchy that had developed in the province since the previous summer, issued a formal Association to unite Jerseymen in a common cause and solidify support for the rebellion (Doc. 1). During the succeeding months the popular front, with primary political control residing in local committees, with ease replaced the duly constituted governmental structure as the source of effective authority in the province (Doc. 3). Steps were taken to insure compliance with the directives of the Provincial Congress and suppress overt opposition to the insurrection through political persuasion (Doc. 9) and force of arms (Doc. 18). Subjected to public ostracism (Doc. 5) as well as physical abuse (Doc. 16), most dissenters came to regard prudence as the better part of valor (Doc. 17).

But far more important than the preparation for and direction of armed resistance was the larger issue of the ultimate course of the rebellion. With the passage of time, the revolt assumed a life and momentum of its own; it became increasingly difficult for supporters of the rebellion to deny the logic of their convictions and conduct. A former friend of the royal government like Charles Pettit felt his political sentiments increasingly incompatible with his privileged position as provincial surrogate and clerk of the council (Doc. 8). Although all signs pointed toward a war for independence, even the most ardent Whigs were reluctant to confront the momentous issue openly or with much enthusiasm. When activist John De Hart resigned his seat in the Continental Congress for personal reasons, he did so with regret and apprehension at the steady escalation of the imperial dispute (Doc. 11). And while "Lycurgus" clearly favored secession from the empire, he could only broach the subject circuitously (Doc. 15). Governor William Franklin, who saw which way the rebellion was going, could only stand by helplessly as British authority rapidly eroded (Doc. 7). While the assembly (Doc. 13) dismissed the fears of independence felt by some residents (Doc. 10), defenders of the royal regime knew well that New Jersey was on the eve of a revolution (Doc. 14).

1 The New Jersey Provincial Association

[*PCCS Minutes*, pp. 176-77.]