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The Spirit of '76

With the advent of peace, the people of New Jersey turned from the arduous struggle for independence to the monumental task of recovering from the ravages of war. Recovery involved much more than simply beating swords into plowshares and reconverting battlefields into farmlands. Nearly eight years of bitter warfare had brought a staggering amount of physical destruction and damage to homes and churches, barns and bridges, crops and orchards; had badly disrupted economic activities and drastically altered life styles and modes of social organization; divided families and communities into antagonistic factions; and inflicted emotional stress, injury, exile, and death upon countless men, women, and children. Hardly an aspect of life in the "cockpit of the Revolution" escaped serious dislocation during the war.

In rebuilding their state and reordering their lives, Jerseymen were engaged in a process of redesign rather than reconstruction. More than a movement to secure home rule, the American Revolution was an expression of some of the most innovative and far-reaching intellectual currents of the eighteenth century. The Declaration of Independence, an eloquent statement of Enlightenment thought, not only announced the severance of political ties with Great Britain, but also heralded the birth of a new sociopolitical order that differed in fundamental respects from the dominant traditions and practices of the past.

To those who risked their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor in behalf of American independence, Thomas Jefferson and his congressional colleagues promised the creation of a governmental system that would be "most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness" and derive its "just powers from the consent of the governed" as well as a social order in which all men would be "created equal" and enjoy the "unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The most important challenge to members of the revolutionary

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generation—indeed to subsequent generations of Americans—was translating Jefferson's idealistic rhetoric into everyday reality. To Whigs everywhere the grand objective could only be achieved through the establishment of republican government and the inauguration of humanitarian reforms. And while the winning of independence took precedence at first over the creation of a republican society, the public record of the war years provides abundant information about the new order thoughtful Jerseymen were striving eventually to establish.

The state constitution of 1776 (see Sec. VII, Doc. 6) provided the framework for a democratic republic based upon the sovereignty of the people. But it was not easy to reject time-honored notions about government and politics and immediately embrace the new system of government. Although the state government was structurally similar to the royal regime, its successful operation required radically new attitudes and assumptions about the relationship of the citizenry to the political process and public officials. There was no more articulate or effective spokesman for republicanism in New Jersey than Governor William Livingston. From his inaugural address (see Sec. VII, Doc. 13) to his announcement of independence nearly seven years later (Doc. 12), he labored tirelessly in both public speeches and anonymous newspaper essays (Doc. 5) to instill in the people an appreciation of and commitment to the experiment in self-government in which they had such a vital stake. The process of political education was rapid. With the zeal often characteristic of converts, Jerseymen soon came to extoll the merits of the American over the British system of government (Doc. 4), recognize that the voice of the people was an essential element in the formula for good government (Doc. 7), and publicly criticize elected officials and lecture them on their duties (Doc. 2). Such sentiments could not have been expressed a decade earlier when residents almost universally lauded the English constitution and exhibited more deference to governmental leaders.

Besides representative government, participatory politics, and popular sovereignty, New Jersey republicans believed that public virtue (the subordination of self-interest to the common good) was absolutely essential in a democratic republic. Moreover, they felt that there could be no virtue in public life without corresponding virtue in private life. But from the time the state government was first established, political leaders (see Sec. VII, Doc. 13) and private citizens (see Sec. VII, Doc. 12) alike were concerned with the maintenance of civic virtue. How to instruct the citizenry about the rights and responsibilities of republicans? How to imbue them with the principles and precepts most conducive to patriotism? How to combat and prevent the licentiousness, corruption, greed, and immorality that threatened to undermine private and thus public virtue?

Even amid the perils of the revolutionary war, Jerseymen began to turn their attention to the means of securing the republican ideal—the blend of civic and personal virtue—as the only firm foundation of the new state government. Despite the firm legal separation of church and state that accompanied the Revolution, some people felt that churches, which traditionally instructed the people in the correct behavior patterns for living in this world, had an important role to play in the republican experiment because private morality

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would necessarily lead to public morality (Doc. 11). Others put their faith in secular institutions as the best safeguards of republicanism. They did so in part because of the conviction that dedication to virtuous conduct in public affairs would both precede and result in personal virtue. But more important was the belief that an enlightened populace knowledgeable about the issues and ideas of the day was a prerequisite to republican government and responsible citizenship. Hence the Revolution gave crucial impetus to the development of the twin safeguards of democratic government and individual liberty in America—the press (Doc. 1) and the school (Doc. 3).

The heightened concern for education and morality inevitably led to a comprehensive reexamination of virtually every aspect of New Jersey society. The result was an ambitious reform movement that began during the revolutionary war, gained momentum in the 1780s and 1790s, and reached fruition during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Humanitarian crusades, sumptuary regulations, democratization of officeholding and liberalization of the franchise, separation of church and state and guarantees of religious freedom, revisions of criminal codes and penal practices, and abolition of such vestiges of feudal landholding as primogeniture and entail are only a few of the ways Jersey men sought to eradicate social ills and create a republican society through practical application of the precepts of the Declaration of Independence.

Nothing exposed in a more graphic—and embarrassing—manner the discrepancy between the principles of 1776 and the practices of the times than the institution of human slavery. Jersey men were no strangers to the dilemmas of involuntary servitude. The enslavement of black Africans began in New Jersey in the seventeenth century, and on the eve of the Revolution the province had the second largest slave population north of the Mason-Dixon line. Commitment to the peculiar institution was especially strong in Bergen and Somerset and portions of Monmouth and Hunterdon Counties. The Society of Friends was the only constant critic of slavery in colonial New Jersey even though many of its members owned slaves. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Quakers led by Burlington's John Woolman had launched a determined campaign against the pernicious practice—a campaign aided by the increased concern with personal freedom that had arisen during the protest against British legislation during the prerevolutionary era (see Sec. III, Doc. 8).

The issue of slavery, temporarily submerged by the crises of 1775-1776, was a primary topic of discussion in New Jersey during the revolutionary war. Friends were now joined by those who viewed slavery as inconsistent with the tenets of the Declaration of Independence and incompatible with republican society. From the fall of 1780 to the spring of 1781 a debate—the most extensive conducted in any state prior to the 1830s—raged in the Jersey press over the institution of slavery and proposed abolition laws. If there were few unqualified defenders of slavery in the state, there were also few advocates of immediate abolition (Doc. 6). Instead, the debate turned on the terms and timing of manumission or gradual liberation (Docs. 8 and 9). Despite the activities of antislavery societies, discussions in the press, legislative petitions (Doc. 10), and several statutes touching upon various aspects of slavery, it would be another generation before the matter was finally resolved. With bitter irony, it

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was stipulated by legislative enactment that any slave born in the state after July 4, 1804, would become a free citizen at a certain age (males, 25; females, 21) and not a slave. It was at best a half-hearted measure designed to meet the interests of the free white citizen rather than the black slave; on the eve of the Civil War there were still slaves in New Jersey.

As exemplified by the abolitionist movement, the Spirit of '76 diffused slowly but steadily throughout American society. It would take more than a generation for the principles of the Declaration of Independence to become articles of national faith and for the forces unleashed by the Revolution to find lasting expression in the institutions, ideals, and practices of the new republic. But the process begun during the years 1763-1783 proved inexorable. Looking back from the perspective of 1840, Ashbel Green, a member of the revolutionary generation in New Jersey, could scarcely comprehend the sweeping changes that had taken place during his lifetime (Doc. 13). The Revolution had not only given lasting identity to "the American, this new man," to use Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's famous phrase, but also had given birth to the United States, a new nation. And in its numerous legacies to subsequent generations, the American Revolution has not yet run its course.

1 Isaac Collins Announces the First Newspaper in New Jersey

[*New-Jersey Gazette*, December 5, 1777.]

Because theirs was the only major mainland colony without a newspaper prior to 1776, the residents of New Jersey had to rely on the New York City and Philadelphia press as a source of news and a forum for their views. The obvious advantages of an indigenous newspaper loomed even larger when the British army took New York in September 1776 and the Pennsylvania capital a year later. New Jersey was literally without any means of public mass communication. It was in part to facilitate the dissemination of information that Isaac Collins of Burlington undertook, with the support of Governor William Livingston and the legislature, to publish the state's first newspaper in December 1777. But in reality the *New-Jersey Gazette* was only the harbinger of an impending communications revolution. Shepard Kollock launched a second paper at Chatham in February 1779, and by 1787 newspapers were published in Elizabethtown, New Brunswick, Princeton, and Trenton. Why should a state without a newspaper in 1777 witness the appearance of four within a decade? The underlying cause of the newspaper boom was political. The government needed to import information to its citizens. Equally important, however, was the belief that an educated public was a prerequisite for republican