THE POLITICAL REVOLUTION IN PENNSYLVANIA IN 1776

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TWO great themes in American history are the influence of immigration and the influence of the frontier upon our life and institutions. Both of these, which have tended to develop a democratic spirit, played an important part in the political revolution in Pennsylvania in 1776. Penn’s desire to build a flourishing and prosperous colony led him to stimulate immigration. While the colony was to be an asylum for the persecuted English Quakers, so generous was his policy that the province soon became a haven for the oppressed of all religious sects and nationalities. Encouraged, too, by the liberal grants of land which appealed to the down-trodden peoples of Europe, this tide rose until by 1755 it was estimated that out of a total white population of 220,000 there were 100,000 of non-English birth.1

The whole tendency of colonization has been to stock colonies with radicals and dissenters, thereby rendering inevitable sharp contrasts in temperament and outlook between these classes and those who held the reins of government—in the case of Pennsylvania the conservative Quakers and Episcopalians. The frontier tended to make the radicals even more radical and to convert those of a conservative mind to those views.

In 1776 Pennsylvania presented the striking situation of a revolution within a revolution. The revolt against England afforded a favorable opportunity for the Scotch-Irish and Germans to free themselves from the autocratic rule of the English Quakers. The hardy frontiersmen, too, now could avenge themselves upon the Assembly, controlled by the peace-loving Quakers, for its neglect to provide protection from the Indians.

The causes of this revolution were numerous and varied. First, there was the clash of economic interests between the agricultural

1 Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York (New York, 1856-58), VI, 993.
west and the mercantile east. This fundamental cause was intensified by racial and religious differences. Benjamin Franklin estimated that the population was about one-third English Quakers, one-third Germans and one-third Scotch-Irish. To these racial differences must be added those of a religious nature. The freedom assured by Penn led to a rapid multiplication of denominations and sects. An early historian of the state remarked that there was "a greater number of different religious societies" in Pennsylvania than perhaps in any other of the British dominions. The political situation was very early complicated by the settlement of these various races and religious groups in distinct regions of the province, thus developing sectional differences and disharmony of interests which at times became exceedingly acute.

Of far greater importance, however, in developing a revolutionary spirit was the question of defense. It led to prolonged and acrimonious quarrels between the conservative easterners and the intrepid frontiersmen. The Quakers, opposed to bearing arms, controlled the Assembly. The frequent wars in Europe in which England was involved during the eighteenth century extended to North America, forcing the colonists into struggles in which they had little interest. The rapid extension of the frontier soon led to conflicts with the Indians and the French in the Ohio Valley. The Indians deeply resented the encroachment on their lands and naturally harassed the settlers. But the Quaker-controlled Assembly would not make adequate provision for the defense of the frontiers. The situation became so desperate in 1755 that a petition was sent to the provincial agent in London to be presented to the Privy Council. It said: "Numbers of your majtys. good Subjects, on the sev'l frontiers have recently 'been barbarously murdered, by bloodthirsty Savages; & whole Townships broke up, & driven from their Habitations.'" One man wrote from York on November 5, 1755, that the great question there was "whether we shall stand or run? most are willing to stand, but have no Arms nor Ammunition. Appeals have been sent to the Assembly, letters to the Governor

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and others, but no Answer. People from Cumberland are going thro this Town hourly in Droves and the Neighboring Inhabts. are flocking into this Town Defenceless as it is."

The long and bitter struggle over defense greatly exacerbated the differences between the east and the west and culminated in a persistent demand for a thoroughgoing reform in the system of representation in the Assembly. Because of the unequal representation the frontiersmen could not force the Assembly to take more vigorous action. It was quite as natural for the frontiersmen, therefore, to rebel against the old aristocratic régime as it was for the Americans in general to revolt from the rule of Great Britain. By high property qualifications for the suffrage, by refusing to create new counties when demanded and by greatly limiting the number of representatives for the western counties, the Quakers maintained their hegemony. They were able to keep themselves in power by their manipulation of the representation in the Assembly and on them was wreaked the vengeance of the westerner and the disfranchised citizens of Philadelphia when the opportunity was afforded by the war with England.

All these causes of antagonisms likewise existed in Philadelphia. Due to property qualifications the laborers and mechanics of the eastern metropolis were denied the vote and the right to participate in the government. The democratic spirit was developing in the minds of these people just as surely and determinedly as it was among the inhabitants of the frontier. With better opportunities in the city for association, meeting, discussion and the dissemination of ideas, it was natural that the leadership in this revolutionary movement should come from Philadelphia. To these leaders the western counties turned with hearty and loyal support. The combination was all-powerful. When the opportunity came all vestiges of the old order were swept away.

The attempt to enforce the new British colonial policy inaugurated in 1764 furnished the needed opportunity. The Stamp Act was followed in rapid succession by other acts which continued to arouse the colonists. On May 19, 1774, Paul Revere arrived in Philadelphia bearing a letter from the people of Boston announcing the passage of the Boston Port Bill.6 Public meet-

5 York County Papers, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).
6 Pennsylvania Gazette, Postscript, May 18, 1774.
ings were held in Philadelphia and soon the news was spread throughout the colony by the revolutionary machinery. This machinery consisted of Committees of Correspondence in each county and town of the province. Charles Thomson tells us that whenever any news of importance reached Philadelphia "it was immediately dispatched to the county committees and by them forwarded to the committees of the districts" where it was disseminated to the whole body of the people.  

Soon Committees of Inspection and Observation were created in each county and these gradually usurped the powers of government. In these organizations the people who had been denied the vote could have a voice. They could play a part in governmental affairs and were determined that these privileges, so long desired and fought for, should not be surrendered without a struggle.

With such efficient local organizations it was natural that, as the revolutionary spirit developed, representatives of these committees should meet together. The first general meeting, known as the Provincial Committee, was held in Carpenters' Hall on July 15, 1774, with delegates from all the counties attending. These men, with no semblance of legal authority, considered themselves the true representatives of the people. They undertook not merely to tell the Assembly to choose delegates to the Continental Congress, but also to express what they supposed to be the opinion of the people of Pennsylvania in the shape of instructions to them.

A more important meeting, known as the Provincial Convention, was held in Philadelphia from January 23 to 28, 1775. The fact that its sessions were held in the State House shows how sentiment had changed. It approved the proceedings of the Continental Congress and resolved to "faithfully endeavour to carry into execution, the measures of the association entered into, and recommended, by them." The pretext for calling the Convention was to encourage domestic manufacturing. But the real object was to familiarize the people with the necessity of subverting the old charter and establishing a new constitution on a

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more popular basis. From the time of this meeting until June, 1776, there was a sort of dual authority in Pennsylvania; the Whigs and radicals favoring the General Committee and the Conferences; their opponents supporting the Assembly and the old charter. No attempts were made as yet to overthrow the existing order, primarily because the Assembly was keeping pace with the general opinion throughout the province. On March 9, 1775, Governor Penn sent a message to the Assembly suggesting that in the present critical condition of affairs it would be more respectful to the authorities in England if each colony should state its peculiar grievances in separate petitions, rather than by making common complaint through a general Congress. This suggestion was emphatically refused by the Assembly.9 Furthermore, in the summer of 1775 the Assembly agreed to arm the inhabitants and ordered five thousand new muskets with bayonets and other accoutrements. With only three dissenting votes it ordered £35,000 to be struck in bills of credit.10 In November, 1775, the Assembly went even further and drew up resolutions enlisting men and providing for them, thus converting the Associators into a regular militia.11

As the war developed, the idea of independence grew apace and finally wrecked the old government and put an end to Penn’s charter. While the Assembly was willing to grant men and money to fight the British, the idea of a total separation from England was abhorrent to the Quakers and the Philadelphia aristocracy. Joseph Reed, in a letter to General Washington from Philadelphia, March 3, 1776, said: “Notwithstanding the act of Parliament for selling our property, and a thousand other proofs of a bitter and irreconcilable spirit, there is a strong reluctance in the minds of many to cut the knot which ties us to Great Britain, particularly in this colony and to the southward.”12

The radicals were determined to rule themselves and by the end of February, 1776, plans for a provincial convention and the ultimate establishment of a new frame of government seem

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11 Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representatives of the Province of Pennsylvania, VI, 646.
12 William B. Reed, Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed (Philadelphia, 1847), I, 163.
to have matured. The opposition was too great, however, so the attempt had to be postponed. The leaders were in a quandary. What should be done? The answer had been vaguely fore-shadowed almost a year and a half before when the first Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. It was evident from the very beginning that Congress would add to the factional strife in Pennsylvania. The leaders in Congress desired independence. The support of Pennsylvania was needed, but the assembly had twice instructed its delegates to oppose such a move. When the last attempt to have these instructions altered was defeated the contest was transferred to Congress. Allied with the radicals of Pennsylvania the Congressional leaders determined to make the final assault upon the charter of William Penn. Richard Henry Lee wrote from Philadelphia on April 22, 1776: "You ask me why we hesitate in Congress. I'll tell you my friend, because we are heavily clogged with instructions from these shamefully interested Proprietary people." As early as March, Andrew Allen seemed to have divined that Congress would interfere in the affairs of Pennsylvania for he wrote that a certain action of Congress was a "deep laid Plot . . . to blow up the Constitution and Government of this Province which has hitherto been a Barrier against their dark Designs." Amid the rumble of heavy cannon fire on May 8th and 9th—the first indication that actual war had reached this part of the colonies—Congress heatedly debated a resolution introduced by John Adams. It was passed on May 10th and was the beginning of the end of the old government. The resolution urged the respective Assemblies of the United Colonies, "where no government sufficient to the exigencies of their affairs hath been hitherto established, to adopt such government as shall, in the opinion of the representatives of the people, best conduce to the happiness and safety of their constituents in particular, and America in general."

Congress knew full well what it was doing. James Duane wrote to John Jay on May 11th: "A Resolution has passed a Committee of the whole Congress, recommending it to the

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14 Ibid., I, 398.
Colonies to assume all the powers of government. It waits only for a preface and will then be ushered into the world. This in Confidence as res infecta."\(^a\) The preface or preamble was adopted on May 15th. It went far beyond the resolution for it struck at the root from which grew all authority under the charter. It denied the necessity or reasonableness of oaths of allegiance to any government under the Crown and demanded that the exercise of all such authority be totally suppressed and that all functions of government be exercised under the authority of the people alone. The preamble was a veritable declaration of independence. John Adams wrote: "It was indeed, on all hands, considered by men of understanding as equivalent" to such a declaration.\(^b\)

This advice of Congress was all the radicals of Pennsylvania needed. The very same day the preamble was adopted a meeting was held at the Philosophical Hall in Philadelphia. The next day the meeting decided "to call a convention with speed; to protest against the present assembly's doing any business in their House until the sense of the Province was taken in that convention.\(^c\) Gatherings were held at once throughout the colony and everywhere it was agreed to call a convention. The revolutionary machinery functioned smoothly and on June 18th representatives of the county committees met in Philadelphia. The record of the first session of this body—the formal organization of the revolutionary government—is as follows: "This day a number of gentlemen met at Carpenters' Hall... being deputed by the committees of several of the counties of the province, to join in a Provincial Conference in consequence of a circular letter from the committee of the City and Liberties of Philadelphia, inclosing the resolution of the Continental Congress of the 15th of May last."\(^d\) On the first day devoted to business the conference declared that "the present government of this province is not competent to the exigencies of our affairs," and that it was

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\(^a\) Edmund C. Burnett (ed.), *Letters of the Members of the Continental Congress*, I, 443.


\(^d\) The Proceedings Relative to Calling the Convention of 1776 and 1790 (Harrisburg, 1825), p. 35; *Pennsylvania Archives*, Second Series, III, 635 ff.
absolutely necessary that "a provincial convention be called by this conference for the express purpose of forming a new government in this province on the authority of the people only." 20

The conference not only made plans for the Constitutional Convention, but also usurped practically all the powers of government. The members considered themselves the true representatives of the people. They recommended calling out the militia and laid down complete plans for the mustering, the organizing, and the commanding of these troops. They notified the judges to suspend the courts until a new government could be organized. They took a decided stand for independence, declaring that George III had excluded the inhabitants of America from his protection by "an accumulation of oppressions, unparalleled in history," and stated that on behalf of themselves, "and with the approbation, consent and authority of our constituents, unanimously declare our willingness to concur in a vote of the congress declaring the united colonies free and independent states." 21

No time was lost, for the conference met every day, Sunday not excepted. It concluded its work on June 25th and set July 8th for the election of members to the Convention. On election day the Declaration of Independence was read for the first time in Philadelphia. It was a clever move, and was definitely planned by the radicals who hoped thereby to exert an influence in favor of the Convention. One week later the Convention assembled in Philadelphia. Its sessions continued through the summer and did not end until September 29th. James Allen, a member of the old Assembly, wrote: "It was a strange scene at the State House, where the Congress, Assembly, Convention & Admiralty Court are sitting, all at the same time." 22 But stranger was the fact that fourteen members of the Assembly were likewise members of the Convention. Like the Conference, the Convention assumed complete control of the government.

In the meantime the Declaration of Independence had been adopted. Pennsylvania's assent had been given; not by a majority of her delegates, but by a majority of those present. Only five

20 Ibid., III, 639.
21 Ibid., III, 657-658.
22 Diary of James Allen (Historical Society of Pennsylvania), January 25, 1777.
of the nine were in Congress at the time and of these only three voted for independence. The members of the Convention, indignant at this action, elected on July 20th new delegates favorable to independence. When the Declaration was signed on August 2nd only four of the nine signers for Pennsylvania were members of Congress when the famous document was adopted, one of whom—Robert Morris—never voted for it. Thus the majority of Pennsylvania's signers were selected, not by the legally constituted Assembly, but by the Convention, a body which actually had no power to alter the delegation.

It needed no seer to foretell the nature of the new Constitution. It established the most democratic government in America at the time and as a result evoked one of the bitterest political struggles ever witnessed by an American state. Eminent men refused to serve under it; neighbors reviled neighbors; citizens forsook their citizenship, fleeing to more propitious soil, and in the internecine strife blood was spilled on the streets of Philadelphia. This struggle occurred when the British army was at the very doors of Pennsylvania and paralyzed the opposition expected of her. "Hampden" wrote in the Pennsylvania Evening Post: "The time is at last come in which the salvation of this country depends upon the exertions of the individuals of this state. . . . For Heaven's sake let all disputes about frames of government subside for the present, or we shall be obliged to receive a government from the sword of a proud and successful enemy." So critical were affairs that on two occasions Congress itself was compelled to interfere to establish order. At one time Philadelphia was placed under martial law and General Putnam was "constituted chief ruler in this province."

Stirring appeals to turn out were made to the Associators and the militia with little effect. In spite of the demands of Congress few troops were mustered. The chairman of the York County Committee told the Council of Safety that "Several men friendly to the Cause of Liberty are on their March to the Metropolis. But we are sorry to say, many, too many are so lost to Virtue and love of Liberty as to refuse marching; Notwithstanding all

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In-text citations:

15 November 28, 1776.

George Stevenson wrote from Carlisle that some had gone to defend the state, but "a greater Number, even of the Inhabitants of this County . . . have tarried at home and minded their own private Affairs as unconcern'd as if there was the most profound Peace in the Country." The Council of Safety was informed that "Many of the principle Associators of Col. Hunter's Battalion of Berks County, refuse to march, to join General Washington's army at this important Crisis, . . . and proceeded even to dare to enforce the resolve of this Council upon them." Even though paid in advance, almost an entire Lancaster county battalion commanded by Peter Grubb took their guns and went home instead of marching into New Jersey. Washington himself, writing from Bucks County on December 15th to the Council of Safety, said: "The Spirit of Disaffection that appears in this County, deserves your serious Attention. Instead of giving any Assistance in repelling the Enemy, the Militia have not only refused to obey your general Summons and that of their commanding Officers, but I am told exult at the Approach of the Enemy and our late Misfortunes." In January, 1777, George Stevenson wrote from Carlisle that the inhabitants of Cumberland county had "distilled nearly all the Rye, and now . . . they are beginning to distil wheat, because Whiskey is now sold at a higher price than the grain would bring.

The truth of the matter is that many people in Pennsylvania were more interested in gaining control of their own government than they were in fighting the English. The radicals had won their battle and were little concerned with the British invasion. Party feeling was so intense that a large body of men refused to enlist simply because by so doing they would better the fortunes of those who were now in control. Of course all the blame was heaped upon the Constitution. But the opposition really was not directed against the Constitution. It was directed against the men to whom it gave power. Even the "scarcity of salt," a circular letter to the Council of Safety said, "has fur-

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[27] Pennsylvania Archives, Fourth Series (Harrisburg, 1900-02), III, 623.
nished the enemies of America with too good an occasion to create uneasiness in the minds of many who have credited their false insinuations and artful tales, calculated to destroy all confidence in this Council and the persons intrusted with the management of our publick affairs. Some people very ingeniously, as one writer observed, ascribed "the high price of beef and mutton to the Constitution, but whether," he asks, "they mean the constitution of the state or of the stomach is not fully defined." It is no wonder that a committee of Congress and state officials declared that "the executive Authority of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is incapable of any exertion, adequate to the present crisis."

The heated fight over the Constitution thus continued and consumed the energies of the people in violent partisan strife at a time when every exertion was needed to overthrow the forces of Great Britain. The legion of Loyalists in Pennsylvania were thus able to find shelter under the aegis of the anti-constitutionists and bred suspicion and ill-feeling among the people, public men and soldiers, thereby vitiating the state's participation in the Revolution. A Memorial presented to the Assembly in May, 1777, said that the "natural strength and resources (of Pennsylvania) are such as if, properly collected and employed, would alone be sufficient to repel the present force which threatens us with an invasion." The same idea is expressed in a letter of Colonel Thomas Hartley, written in Morristown on July 5, 1777. He said that General Conway was obliged to lead a few hundred men when "he is capable of commanding thousands. The Deficiency owing to the indolence of the Rulers in Pennsyl.

The "Rulers" had achieved their goal and were not much interested in continuing the war. They had no grievances against England; they owed no debts to British merchants from which a successful war might free them. All they wanted was to govern. Every nerve had to be strained to maintain their precarious position and no risk could be taken by sending large forces against the British.

10 Pennsylvania Evening Post, May 20, 1777.
12 Pennsylvania Evening Post, May 17, 1777.
13 Simon Gratz Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).