

THE PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF 1747

BY ARTHUR J. ALEXANDER

IN ALL, three separate and distinct Associations were organized in provincial Pennsylvania between the closing year of "King George's War" and the outbreak of the American Revolution. Although each of the three Associations was organized with the same objective in view, defense, only one Association, that organized during the French and Indian War, could lay claim to any statutory existence and that for a limited period.¹

The astute Dr. Franklin, concerned with the defenseless condition of his adopted province, was the sponsor of the original Association organized in the late fall of 1747 as well as its immediate successor eight years later. When it became necessary to organize a third and final Association on the morrow of Lexington and Concord, Franklin was temporarily resident in London in his capacity of Provincial Agent.² Be that as it may, when it was imperative to recruit a military force capable of defending patriot rights Franklin's fellow provincials had immediate recourse to the same type of military organization already popularized by their idol.

The explanation as to why the Province was obliged to rely for its defense upon a voluntary military organization rather than a compulsory militia is to be found in the fact that Pennsylvania had originally been settled by the Quakers. By the 1740's the Society of Friends could no longer claim a majority of the inhabitants of the province, even though the members of that sect represented from one fourth to one fifth of all the inhabitants.³ But even though the percentage of Quakers had declined

¹ *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1809*. Chapter CCCV. Passed November 25, 1755. An Act for the better Ordering and Regulating such as are willing and desirous to be united for Military Purposes within the Province of Pennsylvania. Repealed by the King in Council, July 7, 1756. *Ibid.*, Appendix XXI, Section I.

² *Pennsylvania Archives*, Ser. 8 (Harrisburg, 1931-1935), Vol. VIII, 7231.

³ "The Attitude of the Quakers in the Provincial Wars with Introduction and Notes," by Charles J. Stillé, in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, X-1886-285.

in relation to total population, they still retained a predominant influence in provincial affairs. This influence was potently wielded in the assembly, the sole custodian of all legislative power, a majority of the members of which were also Friends.

Physical defense of the province had been a matter of constant petition and sharp debate, ever since the outbreak of the "War of Jenkin's Ear" and during nearly all of "King George's War" into which it merged.⁴ Several attempts at arming the province had been frustrated only because of the spirited opposition of the Quaker assembly.

Although Quakers did possess conscientious scruples in regard to waging war, only the most rigid sectarians would go so far as to condemn defensive war. Moreover, "So far as military service itself was concerned they (the Quakers) sheltered themselves under the protection of two principles: First, that no man under any English tenure could be compelled to serve in person who chose to serve by proxy; and secondly, that as they had resolved never to be aggressors and as they were not sovereigns, they left the rest to Providence."⁵

Suddenly the entire matter of abstract defense was turned from the field of petition and debate into stark reality, due to the work of privateers in Delaware River and Bay. During the summer of 1747 a group of Frenchmen, Spaniards and renegade Philadelphians joined forces to invade the plantations of two Delawareans resident in Newcastle County. Not only did an innocent woman suffer injury, but two peaceful inhabitants lost all their negroes along with their personal effects.⁶ At the same time the privateers managed to seize three vessels laden with valuable cargoes.

The council raising the objection that "The Length and Difficulty of our Bay and River seem now no longer to be depended on for our Security . . ." called upon the assembly to know why "some Method should [not] be fallen upon to prevent the Evils which threaten us, and to which we lie exposed."⁷

⁴ *Ibid.*, 297. "... the Quakers in Pennsylvania, have, upon every application for sixteen years now passed, refused to raise a militia, refused to raise Men or Money, for the Kings' Service. . . ."

⁵ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁶ *Pennsylvania Archives*, Ser. 8, Vol. IV, 3162-3. *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, 1838-1853), V, 124-5.

⁷ *Pennsylvania Archives*, Ser. 8, Vol. IV, 3141-2. *Colonial Records*, V, 96-99.

All the assembly could say in reply was that "were we under no Restraint, from the Principles professed by most of us, it would not be an easy Task to persuade us, that the Measures which have been proposed for the defense of the province, either by erecting Fortifications, or building Ships of War, would be of any real use. . . ." ⁸ The assembly flatly rejected the council's assertion that the bay and river had ceased to be a defense and insisted that the Newcastle raids were "an Instance of the Boldness of our enemies" which "will be difficult, if not impossible to prevent."

One of the captured vessels had been seized as the result of a ruse involving the use of a regular Delaware River pilot boat. The assembly calmly proceeded to assure the council that "It is equally difficult to guard against the wiles of an enemy."

After a newly elected assembly had convened two months later, the council returned to the attack only to be rebuffed with the advice that a slight change in the assembly's personnel did not signify a change of sentiment. ⁹ But even if the Newcastle raids failed to move the assembly they did have that effect without. Frightened Philadelphians lost no time petitioning their assembly to enact defensive measures only to meet with as cool a reception as had met the council's messages. ¹⁰

It was at this point that Franklin stepped upon the stage, and using the pseudonym a "Tradesman of Philadelphia," penned his *Plain Truth*. Franklin lost no time in addressing himself to the "middling People, the Farmers, Shopkeepers and Tradesmen of the City and Country," rather than to the dominant Quaker element in the assembly "whose religious Prepossessions are unchangeable, their obstinacy invincible," or to the "opposite Party, those Great and rich men, Merchants and others, who are ever railing at Quakers for doing what their Principles seem to require, and what in Charity we ought to believe they think their Duty, but take no one step themselves for the Public Safety." ¹¹ Actually

⁸ *Pennsylvania Archives*, Ser. 8, Vol. IV, 3147.

⁹ *Pennsylvania Archives*, Ser. 8, Vol. IV, 3165.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3168. "A Petition from a great number of the Inhabitants of the City of Philadelphia setting forth the great Danger they apprehend the said City to be in." *Ibid.*, 3175.

¹¹ Benjamin Franklin, *Plain Truth: or Serious Considerations, on the Present State of the City of Philadelphia and the Province of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1747), 16-8.

the "opposite Party" was so short sighted according to Franklin that it would risk its own ruin rather than take a single step which might be of the least benefit to its hated rivals.¹²

Without mincing any words, Franklin launched into what his sub-title so aptly characterized as "Serious Considerations on the Present State of the City of Philadelphia and the Province of Pennsylvania," a graphic word picture of what might befall the peaceful metropolis were it to be suddenly sacked, laying particular emphasis upon the defenseless condition of both city and province. The gist of Franklin's argument was that it was the "middling People" who would have to bear the brunt of the disaster and that it was up to them to take immediate steps for their own defense. Should defense-minded Philadelphians agree with him, he was prepared to "lay before them a Form of an Association."

True to his word, Dr. Franklin did submit a "Form of an Association for our Common Security and Defense" to a "great number of the Inhabitants" of Philadelphia assembled at Mr. Walton's school house in Arch Street on a Saturday evening late in November.¹³ On the Monday following another "great meeting," attended not by the "middling People" whose aid Franklin had so earnestly solicited but rather by "principal Gentlemen, Merchants and others" set the seal of approval upon the Association.¹⁴ This meeting was followed by still another general meeting called for the following night (Tuesday), at which time the Association was formally thrown open to the public for signature and approval.¹⁵ Franklin, ever thoughtful about details, saw to it that the assembly room in the "New-Building" was well supplied with pens and ink.¹⁶

All that was necessary to become an Associator was to sign the "Form of Association," thereby approving of the purposes of the organization and agreeing to be bound by its few simple conditions. The Association was absolutely voluntary and was to remain in force until the peace, or "until some more effectual

¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

¹³ *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 26, 1747.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Franklin, Benjamin, *The Autobiography*, edited by Albert Henry Smyth, New York, I, 361.

Provision be made to answer the same good Ends and Purposes.”¹⁷

Each Associator obligated himself to provide himself before New Year's Day 1748 with a firelock, cartouch box and a stated quantity of powder and ball. Those who could were under the additional burden of providing themselves with a sword, cutlass or hanger.¹⁸

Fifty to one hundred neighbors constituted a company, and companies in turn were grouped together into regiments on a county-wide basis. Companies were permitted to elect their own captains, lieutenants and ensigns while these officers selected their colonels, lieutenant colonels and majors. Immediately after their election the names of the successful candidates were presented to the governor or in his absence to the president of the provincial council for commissioning.¹⁹ Elected officers of the Association were under a duty to serve the organization “gratis, without Wages, Salary or Pay.”

Unless called out by the governor in an emergency the Associators met four times a year in company drill and a fifth time in Regimental Review. At the Annual Review each regiment selected four delegates to a General Military Council, the unifying force for the entire Association. This council was “to consult upon, and frame such regulations as shall be requisite, for the better ordering of our military affairs, improving us in military knowledge, and uniting and ordering our strength, so as to make it of the most service for our Common Security.” Although the Military Council was authorized to enact ordinances and regulations for the governance of the Association it was absolutely forbidden to subject the Associators “to any Pecuniary Mulcts, Fines or Corporal Penalties, on any account whatever.”

Faced with a *fait accompli* the council resolved “to give all due Protection and Encouragement to the Members of the Association,” nor was any time lost advising the Associators that their “Proceedings are not disapproved by the Government and

¹⁷ *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 3, 1747. “Form of the Association into which Numbers are daily entering for the Defence of this City and Province.” Paragraph Eighth. The same issue of the *Gazette* also contains “Remarks” on the preamble and the various articles of the Association.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Paragraph First.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Paragraphs Third and Fourth. From May, 1747 until November, 1748 the council was the provincial executive in the absence of the governor.

that if you go on and chuse your Officers according to your Articles, Commissions will be readily granted them.”²⁰

On the other hand, as far as the assembly was concerned the Association did not exist. Be that as it may, months later when the council officially advised that body what had been accomplished for the defense of the province, the assembly found it “difficult for us to express our Sentiments.”²¹ The assembly did admit that while “most of us . . . have professed ourselves principled against the bearing of Arms,” it was “willing to make charitable construction on their conduct,” at the same time it hoped that “like charitable sentiments will prevail with them concerning us . . . when we have repeatedly declared we cannot in conscience join with any preparation of this kind.”²²

When the council recognized the existence of the Association, it simultaneously took steps to advise the proprietors as to the steps that had been taken in defense of their province. The council did not have to wait long for their reply and it well may be that the reply they did receive was not what they had expected. The Penns had “great doubts whether [the Association] is not liable to such objections as render it unsafe for the Persons who have joined in it,” and it was with this thought in mind that they sought the advice of the King’s solicitor and attorney general.²³

The Penns objected on another score—whether or not the council was “warranted to give commissions to any officers who are to receive their Orders from others than yourselves or those you appoint, as this is giving the power of the Militia, or calling the People together for their defence, from the King to themselves and which I fear will be esteemed greatly criminal.”²⁴ Objection was also forthcoming to the Military Council set up under the Association which was “very contrary to what is practised here [in England] and I conceive to Law.”

The Penns’ objections gave the council “no small concern” as well they might. As a matter of fact, if peace had not been declared their action might have given them much greater concern.

The council in defense claimed that they had been forced

²⁰ *Colonial Records*, V, 158, 168.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Colonial Records*, V, 240. Thomas Penn to Council, March 30, 1748.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

to act in spite of themselves, because the provincial assembly had failed to act. They maintained that since the "best and soberest Inhabitants," the "most substantial Freeholders," were behind the Association they saw no reason to deny them "liberty of meeting under Arms and forming themselves into Companies for learning Military Discipline."²⁵ As for the commissions, these had been granted only to known "Friends of the Government," persons whose characters and fitness was within the personal knowledge of the president and the council.

The temporary colonial executive also denied that they had parted with their power of governing either the Association or its Military Council, inasmuch as both had been subjected to the governor's orders in his capacity as captain-general. If the Military Council had authority to make regulations for the control of the Association it was only because none could be expected from the provincial assembly. Could there really be any objection if the governor's approval was necessary in order to render a proposed regulation effective?

When the Penns challenged the authority which the council had assumed to exercise in connection with the organization of the Association, "King George's War" already had been successfully terminated in their country's favor, and thus their objections were more or less academic. Not so academic was the stand taken by Pennsylvania Quakers both within and without the assembly during the course of the war. The provincial assembly claimed that "most of us as well as many others within this Province . . . have professed ourselves principled against the bearing of arms." But was this sentiment really so overwhelming as to explain the assembly's action or inaction during the war period?

As a matter of fact, at least one officer of the Association, Lieutenant Richard Renshaw was a Quaker. On the other hand, although Lieutenant Renshaw may not have been opposed to warfare, he did object to taking the customary oath preliminary to receiving his commission, necessitating special permission to substitute his affirmation instead.²⁶

In an "Introduction and Notes" to *The Attitude of the Quakers in the Provincial Wars*, written more than half a century ago,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 319-322. Council to the Proprietaries, July 30, 1748.

²⁶ *Colonial Records*, V, 184.

Dr. Stillé analyzed the reasons for Quaker opposition to the defense of the province and came to the conclusion that such opposition as there was, was on constitutional rather than religious grounds. There did exist a group of Quakers opposed to war ready to object to measures of defense, but influential as this group may have been in Quaker affairs, it was none too large.²⁷ Was it the attitude of this minority of a minority which influenced the assembly in its relations with the Association?

In the course of his "Introduction" Stillé lists instances in which the assembly lent its financial aid in support of Mars.²⁸ Again at the very outbreak of the "War of Jenkin's Ear" the assembly advised the governor that they had no objection to his "organizing forces for defence from such of the people as had no scruples concerning war."²⁹ If the assembly was willing to go this far why did it ignore the Association when it was formed, let alone fail to recognize it when it was absolutely voluntary and composed of those Pennsylvanians who had "no scruples concerning war."

Dr. Franklin directed his appeal to the "middling People," but the "middling People" may not in reality have been those whose support Franklin so urgently solicited. When the Form of Association was originally presented to the meeting assembled in Mr. Walton's school house, the gathering was attended "by a great number of the Inhabitants"; social and economic status was not specified. The meeting the following Saturday was well attended by "the principal Gentlemen, Merchants and others." According to the council the Association was composed of our "best and soberest Inhabitants," our "most substantial Freeholders." It is doubtful whether these phrases can be used to characterize the "middling People." Such phrases are much more descriptive of what Franklin himself called the "opposite Party" in relation to the Quakers.

Franklin would have us believe that the "opposite Party" was so blinded to its own interests that it absolutely refused to come to the provincial defense, lest in so doing it aid its Quaker rivals. Actually the "opposite Party" may not have been as blind as

²⁷ Franklin, *Autobiography*, I, 364-366.

²⁸ Stillé, Introduction and Notes, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, X, 290-292.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 290.

Franklin would have us believe; see a letter in Franklin's own newspaper refuting his argument along this line.³⁰

Can it be then, that the assembly refused to recognize the Association because it feared that by doing so it might directly or indirectly give the "opposite Party" some advantage, direct or indirect, that it did not already possess? The Penns objected to the Council "giving the Power of the Militia, or calling the People together for the defence, from the King to themselves." Is it not possible that the Quaker Assembly may also have anticipated this objection, and, instead of antagonizing its rivals by interposing political or constitutional objections, preferred to ignore the newly organized body; and then when officially advised of its existence to fall back on its religious scruples.

Finally, what did Dr. Franklin, the sponsor of the Association gain for his efforts? Franklin, who already was the clerk of the assembly, seems to have gained in the public esteem and was also called upon to consult with the council "in every measure wherein their concurrence was thought useful to the Association."³¹ That Dr. Franklin was honored by being elected colonel of the newly organized City Regiment of Associators, only to refuse his commission because he conceived himself "unfit," is beside the point.³²

³⁰ *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 19, 1747.

³¹ Franklin, Smyth, ed., *Autobiography*, I, 363. *Ibid.*, *Writings*, II, 362. Benjamin Franklin to Cadwallader Colden, September 29, 1748. "The share I had in the late Association, and c, having given me a little present run of popularity. . . ."

³² Franklin, Smyth, ed., *Writings*, I, 362. Franklin states that he declined the colonelcy in favor of a Mr. Lawrence. Actually Thomas Lawrence was only a lieutenant colonel, Abraham Taylor having been the Colonel. *Colonial Records*, V, 175.