Thomas McKean and the Coming of the Revolution

The American Revolution and its participants continue to exercise a dramatic appeal for professional and amateur historian alike. Indeed, if one can judge from the number of books and monographs published on the subject in the past decade, interest in that event is accelerating. The continuing relevance of the Revolution is clear to a world witnessing persistent colonial wars and an increasing concern with human rights and dignity. Intensifying revolutionary behavior in our own society, a growing use of revolutionary rhetoric by today's youth, and an understandable desire on the part of many Americans to comprehend more fully conditions contributing to social convulsion also account for the mounting curiosity about our radical heritage. Publishers hopeful of benefiting from the approaching two-hundredth anniversary of our Declaration of Independence have added their own impetus to the study of our national origins and have stimulated interest in the participants of those tumultuous years. At least one result of this quickening interest has been a deepening appreciation of the aims and activities of heretofore lesser-known figures of the Revolutionary era. One of these, Thomas McKean, who had diligently
served Delaware and Pennsylvania in the Revolutionary years, was convinced toward the end of his hectic life that his career was "suitable for the delineation of the historic pencil."\(^1\) It is incontestable that critical moments of America's Revolutionary history seemed to swirl about him. His contemporaries readily acknowledged that there was "scarcely ... a page of the American Revolutionary history" that failed to "yield some testimony of his active and efficient patriotism." Yet, despite a greater focus by today's historians on secondary figures in the American Revolution, to date McKean has not received the attention he so desperately sought and, it is clear, he largely deserves.\(^2\)

Besides evidence of the variety of seemingly contradictory forces inherent in the Revolution and of the undeniable impact of local conditions on an individual's response to imperial exigencies, McKean's career offers to the historian verification of the part a man's personality and personal ambition played in the determination of his role in that upheaval. As such, his activities in the decade or so prior to 1776 also provide a convenient backdrop against which to view current historiography relating to the coming of the Revolution. Long-held views of the character and direction of the American struggle against England and oversimplifications regarding the motivation and alignment of those embroiled in the contest, have steadily fallen under the onslaught of recent scholarship. More sophisticated questions, interdisciplinary approaches, and such modern tools as the computer have contributed to a continuing reassessment of those individuals caught up in the Revolution. Still, the question of just why some men chose to cast their lot with a revolutionary movement while others clung with varying degrees of tenacity to past associations and commitments remains of central interest. So, too, does the question of why certain men saw in the

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\(^1\) Thomas McKean, "Autobiographical Sketch," McKean Papers, IV, 1, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). The sketch, written in 1814 in the third person, consists of twelve folio pages (one page is missing) and treats McKean's life to the year 1774.

\(^2\) *Aurora* (Philadelphia), Apr. 16, 1799. McKean's career included service as a member of the Continental Congresses (1774-1776, 1777-1783), President of Delaware (1777), President of Congress (1781), Chief Justice of Pennsylvania (1777-1799), and Governor of Pennsylvania (1799-1808). He also participated in the Delaware constitutional convention (1776), Pennsylvania's ratification convention (1787), and Pennsylvania's constitutional convention (1790).
decrees of Westminster and the confusion created by them in the colonies an opportunity to initiate fundamental changes in American society.

To generalize is to distort, but for the greater part of the last half century these issues have been analyzed primarily in terms of social, political, economic, and religious divisions within the colonies. Recent works, however, have increasingly found a more satisfactory explanation in the pervasive political and constitutional ideas and assumptions of mid-eighteenth-century America, especially in the configuration of ideas and attitudes transmitted to America by early eighteenth-century radical English Whigs. In focusing on the intellectual climate, on the role of ideas, and in clarifying the basis of the unnatural fear of conspiracies against their liberties entertained by the colonists, these works have added another dimension to our understanding of the Revolutionary generation. Yet the suspicion remains that these studies, for all their merit, do not convincingly account for the great diversity of local reaction to alleged imperial encroachments, nor for the divisions apparent in nearly every community. When our understanding of the American Revolution is more complete it will no doubt be because we have a greater appreciation of the rich variety of local societies, conditions, and forces influencing eighteenth-century Americans. Our assessment of the Revolutionary years will be more sound, too, when we better comprehend the reaction of specific personality types to situations of competition, stress, and change. McKean’s career in Delaware and Pennsylvania during those colonies’ resistance to British measures after 1763 is a case in point. Why McKean early committed himself to the more radical reaction to British policies and programs, and why he aligned himself after 1774 with the more “violent” faction within the Continental Congress in his approach to imperial and local issues is the subject of this paper.

Delawareans were not eager for a revolution in 1776. As imperial harmony eroded after 1763 the people of the Lower Counties found themselves unwillingly propelled into the controversy and forced in the process to review and reassess their ideals and loyalties. They were not unmindful that, if the policies pursued by the British minis-

3 An excellent discussion of the historiography of this period can be found in Jack P. Greene, ed., The Reinterpretation of the American Revolution (New York, 1968), 1-74.
tries seldom had an immediate or direct impact on them, Delaware’s intimate association with Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland, and with the commerce which flowed to, from, and past the Lower Counties on the Delaware River, made it impossible for them to remain insensitive to the economic and political fate of others. In addition, the great latitude allowed Delaware before 1763 by an undemanding proprietary governor and a preoccupied ministry made most Delawareans after that date chary of any program imimical to their relative independence. Although Delaware, with its sparsely populated counties, poor roads, and lack of indigenous newspapers, was more conservative and backward than its neighbors, its citizens shared with most Americans certain assumptions concerning their rights as Englishmen that bode ill for anyone desirous of limiting those liberties. Delaware’s many Scotch-Irish Presbyterians historically distrusted British aims and frequently harbored sentiments deleterious to whatever good will existed between Delaware and the Mother Country. Yet none of these factors guaranteed a revolutionary fervor among the people of the Lower Counties despite growing British aggressiveness toward the colonies after 1763. Strong Anglican loyalties offset Presbyterian suspicions and Delaware’s small, relatively ignorant population and limited size made it an unlikely candidate to initiate revolutionary policies on its own. As a result, few colonies wrestled more agonizingly than did Delaware with the dilemma of opposition to English parliamentary measures. And no man was more responsible for its ultimate commitment to independence than Thomas McKean. Not even the indefatigable Caesar Rodney worked more assiduously and continually to align the people of Delaware behind the more “forward elements” in America’s opposition to England.

Apart from McKean’s Presbyterianism there is little about the externals of his youth to suggest his later enthusiasm for the Revolution. At least works on his life to this date have not identified factors in his childhood that readily explain his later role in the American Revolution. The failure is, to a degree, understandable.

4 The best survey of Delaware during these years is John A. Munroe, Federalist Delaware, 1774-1815 (New Brunswick, 1954).
5 There are a number of dated, brief sketches of McKean’s life focusing on his role as a signer of the Declaration of Independence, but no adequate modern biography is yet available. Roberdeau Buchanan’s Life of the Honorable Thomas McKean (Lancaster, 1890) is an accurate but limited genealogical work. There are two unpublished dissertations: James H.
Those who seek a meaningful glimpse of his childhood must resign themselves to disappointment, for a study of his personal papers reveals no allusions to such matters as the influence of his parents and early experiences, or the number and depth of friendships formed in those early years. It was symptomatic of the man that, when in his retirement he determined to leave an account of his life, he left no arresting vignettes of his boyhood, no recollections of early adventures, no memories of warm associations, and few explicit references to family matters. He eschewed such concerns in favor of his later professional and political interests. Thus only a vague outline of his early life is available.\(^6\)

But even an outline is suggestive. Born in Chester County, Pennsylvania, of Scotch-Irish parents in 1734, McKean was the second of four children. Following the death of his mother, Letitia Finney McKean, when he was eight, he and an older brother, Robert, were sent to Francis Alison’s New London Academy, a school McKean later called “the most celebrated in the province.” During the boys’ school years their father seems to have divided his time between a farm in New London Township and tavern keeping in Londonderry. The McKeans’ property lay in an area replete with spacious and productive farms but family records do not reveal whether the early McKeans possessed a substantial house and barn so characteristic of the region, or whether their possessions were somewhat less pretentious. That it was the latter can be inferred from a relative’s recollection that when “Tom McKean” left home at the age of sixteen his “patrimony” was not large, and from McKean’s own later observation that he had been “the maker of [his] own fortune.”\(^7\)

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Peeling, “The Public Life of Thomas McKean, 1734–1817” (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1929) and Gail Stuart Rowe, “Power, Politics, and Public Service: The Life of Thomas McKean, 1734–1817” (doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1969). Two studies of McKean are currently in progress, one by Dr. John M. Coleman of Lafayette College, and one by the present author.

\(^6\) See McKean, “Autobiographical Sketch.”

\(^7\) Ibid., 2; P. F. Thompson, ed., “Narrative of Thomas McKeans.” Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (PMHB), LII (1928), 77, hereinafter cited as “Narrative”; Thomas McKean to George Washington, Apr. 27, 1789, Hampton L. Carson Collection, HSP; J. S. Futhey, History of Chester County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1881), 193–195, 643; Pennsylvania Archives (Harrisburg, 1898), Third Series, XXIV, 87. McKean’s grandmother left 400 acres to her two oldest sons—McKeans’s father and uncle—and they added somewhat to that estate.
Two things may be asserted with some confidence about his early days. The first is that throughout his long and illustrious life McKean remained closemouthed about his early youth in Pennsylvania; in fact, he appeared at times quite embarrassed about certain aspects of it. The second is that he received what was for the time an excellent education. His later life and writings give almost daily testimony to the training he received at Alison's academy. There can be little doubt that he was an able student even though one political critic later remarked unkindly that he was "without any mental quality above mediocrity, excepting that of mere memory." In 1750, when McKean, according to his own account, had "acquired a knowledge of the languages, the practical branches of mathematics, rhetoric, logic, moral philosophy and of everything taught in that institution," he was sent by his father to continue his more advanced education in Delaware under the guidance of his mother's family, the Finneys.

The move from New London Township to the Finney household in Delaware was a fortuitous one for McKean, for the Finneys by 1750 had achieved substantial political and economic influence in the Lower Counties. McKean's uncle, John Finney, was one of the wealthiest landholders in New Castle County as well as being a prominent figure in that county's military and political life. It was to John Finney's lawyer son, David, that McKean's advanced education was entrusted. The younger Finney, an easy-going man and the heir apparent to a sizable estate, was said to pursue law without a view to its emoluments. Still, the training he gave McKean was similar both to the usual practice of the day and to the type of help McKean himself later extended to young men. If McKean's natural endowments and gift of speech—or perhaps his family connections—

8 A conclusion based on the point of attack of many of his later political critics. See, for instance, William Cobbett, Porcupine's Works (London, 1801), VII, 300, 333, hereinafter cited as Cobbett, Works; Anonymous (William Dickson?), The Quid Mirror (Philadelphia, 1806), 3-5.

9 Ibid., 3; McKean, "Autobiographical Sketch," 2.

10 Gregory B. Keen, "The Descendants of Joran Kyn, Founder of Upland," PMHB, IV (1880), 235-236; James Sterritt to McKean, Aug. 28, 1778; McKean to Mrs. McKean, Apr. 29, 1779, McKean Papers, HSP; McKean to Thomas Rodney, Apr. 17, 1790, McKean folder, Historical Society of Delaware (HSD); Caesar A. Rodney to McKean, May 15, 1790, Rodney Collection, HSD. McKean agreed to oversee C. A. Rodney's law studies, although ostensibly the lad worked under the guidance of McKean's oldest son, Joseph.
more readily explain his choice of vocations, he could not have been unaware that by the mid-eighteenth century in America the legal profession provided the surest and most rapid means of social advancement. The scope of the Finneys' local interests did not of course impede McKeans's opportunities for success but he demonstrated very quickly that his own talents and resourcefulness were considerable. A variety of clerical, quasijudicial, and judicial posts rapidly came his way. His experience as a clerk to the prothonotary of the court of common pleas, deputy prothonotary and register for the probate of wills in New Castle County, and his tenure as deputy attorney general in Sussex County, led to his command of the smallest aspects of a law practice, be it forms of rules, writs, returns, pleadings, exceptions, or general proceedings. Most of the stories regarding his prowess at the bar date from a later period, but it is clear that McKeans early exhibited a remarkable command of his craft. Promising young men such as John Parke soon found it advantageous to read law under his tutelage. During the quarter of a century before the American Revolution, he widened the circle of his influence, expanded his private practice into New Jersey and Pennsylvania, accumulated important and prestigious offices, and established a reputation for honesty, perspicacity and energy that reached far beyond the limits of the Delaware Counties. By 1763 the College of Philadelphia was impressed enough to grant him an honorary Master of Arts degree. McKeans later took great pride in remembering that his personal successes in these years, and the rapidity of his advancement occasioned considerable envy "not only among the Juniors but also . . . some of the seniors of the Profession." \footnote{Rowe, "Power, Politics, and Public Service," chapters 1-2; David Paul Brown, The Forum (Philadelphia, 1856), I, 337, 341-342; George H. Ryden, ed., Letters To and From Caesar Rodney, 1756-1784 (Philadelphia, 1933), 64, hereinafter cited as Ryden, Letters; Richard Peters to William Smith, May 28, 1763, PMHB, X (1886), 350; McKeans, "Autobiographical Sketch," 3. For Parke, see Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., Dictionary of American Biography (New York, 1928-1944), XIV, 210-211.}

One suspects that McKeans account of his reaction to this exhibition of envy tells us more about his own personality than he cared to convey. He assures the reader of his "autobiographical sketch" that his colleagues' jealousy proved nothing more than "an addi-
tional spur” to his industry; that he continued indefatigable in his quest for legal learning, more often than not reading law eight and nine hours a day. If his colleagues’ envy did prove “an additional spur” to his efforts it was not the last time that McKean followed a course as much because of, as in spite of, the opposition and envy it engendered. But whatever the primary motivation behind his industry, his diligence was rewarded; before his maturity he was accepted as an attorney-at-law in the court of common pleas and the supreme court for the Lower Counties. A seemingly compulsive drive for titles and offices and an obvious personal combativeness—traits more clearly documented in his later Pennsylvania career but also discernible in the pre-Revolutionary years—were largely responsible for McKean’s success in Delaware. Fortunately for McKean, and men like him, Delaware’s political milieu, suffering as it did from the double afflictions of a small population and few capable, willing public servants, encouraged pluralism in officeholding. Thus, not only did McKea[n exhibit a voracious appetite for place and fees but his ambition was constantly encouraged and continually rewarded by his Delaware contemporaries. One must be careful not to extrapolate more than is warranted from the materials available, but a variety of factors suggest that McKea[n’s insatiable quest for place and honors was to a great degree compensation for his personal uneasiness among those more favored by family, station, or wealth. He was not without social conscience but his sense of his own capacity and responsibility for public service was generally so intertwined with a desire for office and a fondness for power that it is difficult to determine at any given moment just what his primary motivation was in seeking a post. In all likelihood McKea[n could not appreciate his own mixed feelings and interests in each instance; at least his private papers suggest such was the case. The fact is, however, he collected offices as some men collect women. And he approached his superiors uncomfortably, combining a sense of awe with an aggressive irascibility that all too frequently produced an

12 McKea[n, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 3; McKea[n to Thomas McKea[n, Jr., Dec. 22, 1803, McKea[n Papers, HSP.

13 McKea[n, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 3; McKea[n to George Washington, Apr. 27, 1789, Hampton L. Carson Collection. Note especially the letter from McKea[n to John Bayard, Mar. 6, 1789, Sprague Collection, III, 81, HSP.
abrupt and haughty exchange. Insecure, hypersensitive, arrogant, he possessed a talent for unnecessarily aggravating those who failed to readily acknowledge his talents or defer to his judgments. His nephew, Thomas McKean Thompson, once observed that McKean "had no patience to bear contradiction" and only "kind forbearance and apparent acquiescence from others" could avert the consequences of his temper. Once one recognizes that McKean could defer to others or assume a subordinate position only with the greatest reluctance, and at the expense of his natural inclinations, one can more easily identify the factors which shaped his role in Delaware's slow but inexorable march toward independence.\(^{14}\)

The same intensity and ambition that secured McKean's success in Delaware's legal circles led him into politics. After a two-year stint between 1757 and 1759 as clerk of the Assembly, he became in 1762, at the age of twenty-nine, a full-fledged member of that body. It is perhaps significant that he began his legislative career just as John Finney ended his. There is reason to suspect that McKean inherited much of the constituency that had previously looked to the elder Finney. This primary Scotch-Irish Presbyterian element supported McKean after 1762 with the same tenacity that it had exhibited for Finney before that date. Remaining a member of the Delaware Assembly from New Castle County, save for one year, until 1779, McKean did so often without bothering to campaign for the seat.\(^{15}\) The legislative records establish clearly that he became almost immediately an active and efficient figure in the body. Endowed with an astonishing capacity for the minutia of public administration, he was frequently assigned tedious, unrewarding, but essential tasks others sought to escape. In a colony lacking eager and competent public servants a man of intractable ambition could go far.\(^{16}\)

\(^{14}\) "Narrative," 112. See also David Paul Brown's perceptive observation in *The Forum*, I, 348.


\(^{16}\) *Votes and Proceedings*, 2-3, 8-9, 33-34, 35-36 ff. The responsibility for securing the printing of the Assembly minutes fell largely upon his shoulders.
Yet there were factors within the same political matrix which could blunt as well as embolden such ambition. If the political system virtually assured a man a long tenure once elected, divisive economic, geographical, social, and religious patterns often created blind opposition, and a conservatism based on isolation and ignorance responded to new personnel and new ideas only grudgingly. John A. Munroe, one of the most knowledgeable scholars regarding the workings of early Delaware politics, has observed also that the genealogist can tell us as much as the historian about the political milieu in Delaware, for “the number of interrelationships among Delaware’s political leaders is truly astonishing.”

Widespread political chicanery added yet another dimension to intense family rivalries, providing further hazards to the novice or newcomer. John Rodney captured much of the substance and tone of politics in the Lower Counties when, agitated over a proposal to remove the court house from Lewes to the crossroads in Sussex County, he complained to his half-cousin, Caesar Rodney, that “It is really surprising to see what disturbance a few Ambitious designing Men may Effect. . . . They seem Determined at all Events to Oppose whatsoever is Proposed by some other, who are not of their party, although it be for the good of the Publick in general; and Even for some of them in Particular. . . .”

New Castle County, with its greater commercial and social ties with Philadelphia and its more heterogeneous social and religious make-up, proved more pliant and receptive to new men and new ideas than did either Kent or Sussex. But even here a strong Anglican mercantile group and landed aristocracy dominated the political, social, and economic life. These factors ultimately combined to thwart many of McKean’s higher aspirations. They also combined to relegate McKean almost perpetually to a minority status in the Assembly during the greater part of his pre-Revolutionary political career, even though he was perhaps the most important figure in the Country Party.

19 McKean, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 5. Jeanette Eckman has suggested that the difference between the court and country parties was in their “culture”; that is, the country party was “purely American” in culture and the court party tended to perpetuate “British culture” (Reed, ed., *Delaware*, I, 270), but see W. B. Hamilton’s more perceptive analysis in his *Thomas Rodney: Revolutionary & Builder of the West* (Durham, 1953), 9.
Nonetheless, by 1764 McKean was in an excellent position to assume a major role in Delaware's affairs and in the constitutional, political, economic, and social struggles emanating from the colonial opposition to the Grenville measures. He was aggressive, experienced, and, with a sound law practice had wealth enough to entertain the idea of greater public service. When Massachusetts on June 13, 1764, authorized the formation of a committee of correspondence to appeal for concerted action among the colonies against the Grenville program, Delaware and McKean responded with some enthusiasm. With McKean a member of its committee of correspondence, Delaware joined other colonies in petitioning the King, expressing concern over the implications of recent bills. The committee hesitated only to the point of recommending discreetly that Henry Wilmot, its agent in London, take caution to present Delaware’s entreaty to the King after Pennsylvania had submitted its petition. “The propriety of [that] conduct” they hoped Wilmot would “readily perceive.”

The opportunity for Delaware to unite more actively with other colonies in protesting British legislation came in June of 1765 following the passage of the Stamp Act. The Massachusetts House of Representatives, having established to its own satisfaction the act's illegality, issued a call for a general congress to be held in New York in October in order to implore relief. Delaware politics, heretofore focused almost exclusively on local issues, gave way at least temporarily under the goad of British action to a united front against what was generally considered Great Britain's arbitrary and capricious actions. Pursuit of a zealous policy by McKean and other members of the Assembly, however, was complicated by the fact that the legislature was currently adjourned and it was thought unlikely that the proprietary governor would call an extraordinary session. Governors of New York, Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia, hoping to frustrate such a congress, had already refused to summon their assemblies. In a well-coordinated effort—instigated and carried out by a few important figures, including McKean, a solution was found while admitting the differences between the factions was not "violent," saw a major distinction stemming from the country party's insistence that judges be dependent upon the Assembly rather than the Crown.

20 McKean, John Caton, and Benjamin Burton to Henry Wilmot, Oct. 20, 1764, Papers Relating to the Lower Counties, 282-283, HSP.
in Delaware by having the representatives of each county send out a letter endorsing Jacob Kollock, Caesar Rodney, and McKean. The three men were subsequently chosen by their respective counties to represent Delaware in the forthcoming Congress.21 Hinting at what would become a constant factor in Delaware politics during that colony's response to imperial exigencies, McKean's county—New Castle—issued a much more militant letter than either Kent or Sussex. While the two latter counties were content to protest "the present distressful circumstances . . . occasioned, in some measure, (as we apprehend), by several acts of parliament . . . ," New Castle forthrightly insisted on "the colonies" right of exclusion from parliamentary taxation."22

McKean and Rodney were among the twenty-seven delegates representing nine colonies who met in New York on October 7, 1765.23 Undoubtedly, McKean shared with the other delegates the frustration of the task before them. The members quickly found that in petitioning for redress of their grievances it was also necessary to establish what liberties they had and ought to have. Rodney, in a letter to his brother, gave some hint of the ambiguity inherent in that task. "We had Carefully to avoid any Infringement of the prerogatives of the Crown, and the Power of Parliament," he wrote, "and Yet in Duty bound fully to Assert the Rights & Privileges of the Colonies."24 If the Congress' subsequent declaration of rights and petition of grievances did not reflect the more radical opinion manifest in many communities, they proved too forward for several of those present, including the chairman, Timothy Ruggles of Massachusetts. From circumstantial evidence during the Congress and his actions immediately following that gathering, it appears that McKean was among those delegates willing to acquiesce in policies even more vehement than those officially countenanced by the Congress. McKean, who had preferred James Otis to Ruggles for the chairmanship in the first days of the meeting because of the

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23 Ibid., 159. Jacob Kollock did not attend.
former’s "boldness," became incensed over Ruggle’s refusal to sign the Congress’ declaration and petition, and his unwillingness to assign any reasons for his timidity. In a later account, McKean asserted that he pressed Ruggles so hard to explain his conduct that a challenge was offered and accepted. Fortunately for all concerned, Ruggles had second thoughts and departed early the next morning "without an adieu to any of his brethren." 25

Not content with bullying Ruggles, McKean became embroiled with still another member who declined formally to endorse the Congress’ work. Robert Ogden of New Jersey, troubled over the lack of any precise recognition or acknowledgment of Parliament’s authority in the Congress’ activities, omitted his signature and enjoined his colleague (and McKean’s father-in-law), Joseph Borden, to remain silent on this fact for some time after their return to New Jersey. Ogden apparently also sought Borden’s influence in gaining a similar pledge of silence from McKean. McKean agreed to remain silent only if no questions were put directly to him regarding the matter, and, as he was later asked in two or three towns the names of those who had not signed the petition, knowledge of Ogden’s reluctance spread rapidly. As a result, Ogden was burned in effigy in several New Jersey communities. He also suffered the ignominy of being rebuked by his assembly and being shorn of the speakership of that body. According to McKean’s account of the affair, and it is certainly believable in light of his later career, Ogden subsequently directed his resentment toward McKean and threats were uttered. In a show of bravado, McKean traveled to Burlington following the Congress, where he met the governor and stayed two nights before leaving, “without hearing any menaces whatsoever.” 26

If McKean’s eagerness for a personal response to British measures, and those who seemingly abetted them, was frustrated in New York and New Jersey, there was opportunity enough in Delaware for such


expressions. As a judge of the court of common pleas in New Castle County, he found on November 1 that he "had influence enough to have justice administered upon unstamped paper." He later contended, as have some historians of Delaware, that this was the first court in the colonies in which such an order was applied, but whether or not McKean’s actions in this instance had historical significance beyond the borders of Delaware, his activities here and those in connection with the Stamp Act Congress further illustrate those personal qualities which operated so fundamentally to determine his reaction to the imperial crisis. That he had the courage or stubbornness to act alone when convinced that justice or necessity warranted it is clear. That he combined a brusque rigidity with an explosive impetuosity is equally clear. One can not say, of course, that McKean was governed primarily by his passions, but it can be established with some confidence that he occasionally allowed his personal impulsiveness to dictate his position. And once committed, he maintained his position with a stubbornness that bordered on the pugnacious.

To what degree McKean’s position in 1765 was based on his appreciation of the British constitution, his sense of history, or merely his attachment to various personalities within the Stamp Act Congress, or within Delaware itself, is difficult to ascertain. It is clear, however, that at this stage his willingness to assume an aggressive position vis à vis the Stamp Act did not distinguish him from most of his Delaware contemporaries. Delaware suffered no sharpened political divisions as a result of the Stamp Act Congress as did Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and, to a lesser degree, Virginia. Many Delawareans might quarrel with McKean’s methods, or fear his impetuosity, but his opposition to the act was widely supported. Appearing in the second session of the Delaware Assembly on May 26, 1766, McKea and Rodney reported on their activities in New York and received the Assembly’s plaudits for their judicious actions. One can easily be misled by the apparent enthusiasm and unanimity displayed here because the degree to which it represented a commitment to serious change, to active revo-

28 Votes and Proceedings, 38, 40–41.
olution, or to independence is difficult to assess. The extent to which those in the Delaware Assembly interpreted the resolutions emanating from the Congress to deny or seriously qualify parliamentary sovereignty over the colonies, or the extent to which they anticipated the implications and consequences of their attack on parliamentary power undoubtedly differed from individual to individual. It is clearly demonstrable, however, that few of Delaware’s most ardent opponents of the Stamp Act—including McKean—were committed either to revolution or to independence. John Rodney seemingly spoke for most Delawareans when he declared “open rebellion . . . Shocking even to think of.”

That McKean was no revolutionary at this point, that he was content to express his opposition within the existing political structure is evident from his activities in the fall session of the 1766 Assembly. Even before the Stamp Act Congress concluded its work a committee of the Delaware Assembly drew up a petition which, while expressing its conviction that “no Person or Persons have any Right to raise or levy Money upon, or exact any Kind of Gift from the Inhabitants under any other Colour or Pretext of Power whatsoever,” was nonetheless profuse in its expressions of continued loyalty to the Crown. Lest this be thought incompatible with McKean’s “radicalism,” as rather an attempt by more conservative members of the Assembly to establish a counterweight to the course pursued by McKean and Rodney in New York, McKean’s subsequent actions proved otherwise. He immediately proposed that a second resolution be sent with the first expressing the gratitude of Delaware for the repeal of the Stamp Act, the news of which had reached the Delaware Counties by that time. Written jointly by George Read, Rodney, and McKean, the second resolution made clear the authors’ “unfeigned zeal” for the King’s person and government and asserted they could not “help Gloriing in being subjects of a King, that has made the Preservation of the Civil and Religious Rights of his Government, and the Safety, Ease and Prosperity of his People, his chiefest Care.” The King, not surprisingly, was delighted with such sentiments.

30 Votes and Proceedings, 10, 29, 54-55.
31 Ibid., 50, 55, 59-60. On Oct. 26, 1767, Dennys de Berdt reported to the Assembly that the “King was so well pleased with it, that he read it over twice.” Ibid., 121.
McKean's expressions of loyalty in this last petition did not preclude a continuing vigilance where American liberties were concerned. He remained one of Delaware's three members of the committee of correspondence and it was he, reacting to the previous year's passage of the Townshend duties, who, in October, 1768, pressed the Assembly to take under consideration these new measures he thought enacted for the express purpose of raising a revenue. He considered the new duties a deliberate contrivance on the part of the ministry to establish precedents for later economic and constitutional encroachments against American rights. It struck McKean that the British had purposely imposed the minuscule imposts to minimize opposition to them. The Committee of the House, responding to McKean's urging, quickly found that the new acts had a tendency to deprive the colonists of their right to tax themselves and were, consequently, "Pernicious to American freedom." Accordingly, the Committee suggested that another petition seeking redress be immediately sent to the King. The resultant petition, written by what was rapidly becoming a triumvirate of Read, Rodney, and McKean, declared that unless Delawareans opposed the Townshend legislation, "Our Assemblies will be no longer the Representatives of a free People, but deprived of the Right of Exercising their own Judgments in Consulting the Good and prosperity of their own constituents; our money will be taken from us without our Consent, and we shall not be allowed the Opportunity of showing our willingness to contribute towards the support of the Government . . . of our Country." "When it is considered, that your Majesty has a Negative upon our Laws, and the sole Execution of them, that our Governor is only during your Royal Pleasure, and all Honors and Distinctions are derived from the Crown," the petition astutely argued, "it is humbly hoped that the Dependence of this Colony on the Mother Country will appear to be sufficiently secured." To widen Delaware's opposition to the Townshend Act, not only McKean but all "the Principal freeholders of New Castle County" entered a compact on August 26, 1769, to support a boycott agreement reluctantly accepted by Philadelphia's merchants, and to pub-

32 Ibid., 156, 157-158; McKean, "Autobiographical Sketch," 11.
33 Votes and Proceedings, 168-169.
licize those failing to adhere to this understanding. That Kent and Sussex Counties did not see fit to elicit a similar expression of support from their people suggests that the divisiveness resulting from the nonimportation agreements, so manifest in other colonies, was growing in Delaware.\textsuperscript{34}

Delaware's official protests, like its unofficial action against the Townshend Act, brought little substantial change. Delawareans could take some comfort in the fact that with the passage of the Townshend duties positive parliamentary legislation aimed at the colonies ended until 1773. During the relative tranquility between 1769 and 1773, McKean continued his accumulation of titles and offices. He was commissioned a justice of the peace and a judge of the court of common pleas and quarter sessions, as well as of the orphans court of New Castle County. Through a recommendation by the justices of the supreme court he was also licensed to practice as a solicitor in chancery, attorney-at-law, and counsellor within all the courts of the province. His reputation was such by this time that he also became a legal advisor to John Penn, proprietary Governor of Pennsylvania and Delaware.\textsuperscript{35} Not irreparably disenchanted with imperial encumbrances, he sought and received in September, 1771, the post of collector of customs at New Castle. Although most Americans resented the rigid enforcement of the customs laws and did not always look with favor upon custom officials, apparently no political stigma was attached to McKean's actions; the Assembly chose him in the following year speaker of that body. His advancement was not confined to his public life and professional interests: in 1770 he was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society, the first of many organizations he was to join.\textsuperscript{36}

Affairs beyond Delaware's borders continued to exert more pressure for a vigorous denouncement of British policies than did internal conditions. It was such external pressure in 1772, for instance, that produced a sense of urgency in Delaware following the British reaction to the burning of the Gaspee in the coastal waters of Rhode


\textsuperscript{35} See his report to Penn, Nov. 10, 1770, Society Collection, HSP.

\textsuperscript{36} Rowe, "Power, Politics, and Public Service," chapters 2, 9; Cobbett, Works, XI, 101-102.
Island. As speaker of the Delaware Assembly McKean was the recipient of resolves from Virginia, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts, imploring Delaware's support in their protest against the recent British actions. Because he received the letters and resolves during the Assembly's recess, he did not lay the materials before that body until October, 1773. But when he did so he warmly urged their endorsement. Significantly, the unanimity and good humor noticeable in earlier sessions were not as evident in 1773, and McKean's efforts to instigate policies similar to those voted in Massachusetts, Virginia, and Rhode Island were originally met with coolness. The Assembly's reservations, or at least the reluctance of powerful voices within that body, was in large measure attributable to the changing sentiment within the Lower Counties.

The paucity of relevant sources concerning these years forces anyone seeking to describe and assess the nature and direction of these changes within Delaware's political community to proceed with caution. There are clues, albeit tenuous ones, indicating that the constant discussion of rights and privileges sparked by imperial issues not only contributed to a growing tension between the Assembly and the proprietary governor but it stimulated a movement among some Delawareans to question the franchise requirements and to push for greater popular power. As early as March, 1770, the Kent physician Charles Ridgely argued "it would be very well to say in so many precise words, what a Freehold is. . . ." Ridgely himself had no doubt what constituted a freeholder but apparently many of Delaware's "Construers of Laws, & the bulk of the people" did not know, or chose to ignore the obvious. By 1773 McKean at least sought to encourage and use a more vocal citizenry to lend impetus to the Whig cause. New Castle's forwardness in fostering agitation against Great Britain increasingly disturbed the more reticent people of Kent and Sussex Counties and their representatives within the Assembly. As one of the principal spokesmen from New

\[37\] Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representatives of the Government of the Counties of New Castle, Kent and Sussex upon Delaware . . . Wednesday, October 20, 1773 (Wilmington, 1774), 8, 10, hereinafter cited as Votes and Proceedings (1773).

\[38\] Ibid., 16.

\[39\] Pennsylvania Colonial Records (Harrisburg, 1852), X, 82-83; Charles Ridgely to Caesar Rodney, Mar. 12, 1770, in Ryden, Letters, 34-35.
Castle County, McKean was determined by October, 1773, to prod the Assembly into a semblance of enthusiasm for the program promulgated by the Virginia, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island resolves, and to do it in open session. Apparently animated by a desire to utilize the more ardent public sentiment in New Castle to stir reluctant colleagues in this matter, McKean strove to open the historically closed Assembly doors to the public. Nothing could have been more alien to most of the delegates than to submit themselves to the scrutiny of a gallery, and McKean's efforts were repeatedly frustrated by a solid bloc of Kent and Sussex representatives. He was reduced to insisting that those who were opposed to the people being privy to the deliberations of the Assembly have their opposition officially recorded in the minutes. These two factors—New Castle's greater eagerness in promoting anti-British behavior and the press for a more active role by the people in the political matrix—drove a further wedge between the assemblymen from New Castle on the one hand, and those from the two southern counties on the other. As a result, McKean's isolation within the Assembly, and that of his New Castle colleagues, became more pronounced.

The stark outline provided by Delaware's Votes and Proceedings for the 1773 fall session offers few guide lines for those seeking to recreate what must have been an important struggle behind the scenes. One can only surmise what transpired between the time of the Assembly's negative response on Friday, October 22, to McKean's motion to read and discuss the resolves sent by the committees of correspondence in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Virginia, and that body's positive, almost eager response to Read's similar proposal on the following day. In all likelihood it was agreed "out of doors" that the Delaware committee of correspondence called for by the resolves be enlarged and staffed by several of the more conservative members of the Assembly. Assured that its involvement in future imperial developments would be governed by a more conservative group than that provided by Read, Rodney, and McKean, the Assembly subsequently agreed to a plan of action proposed by McKean whereby the Assembly officially commended the measures

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40 Votes and Proceedings (1773), 18, 20, 25, 28, 30. John Evans and George Read of New Castle voted with the majority, John Haslet continually supported the New Castle delegation although he represented Kent, and Caesar Rodney, as speaker, did not vote.
taken by the three committees of correspondence as “very Salutary and highly necessary at this Time, when the Rights and Liberties of all appear to be systematically invaded.” It then unanimously agreed to name a committee of correspondence which included Read, Rodney, McKean, John McKinley and Thomas Robinson. However, before this committee could complete its investigation of the Rhode Island incident and the trials relating to it as called for in the resolves, new developments complicated its work by shifting its attention elsewhere.

It was events in Massachusetts that truly created the new sense of urgency in Delaware. The imposition of the coercive acts on the people of Boston during the spring of 1774 met with widespread opposition in the Lower Counties, even among heretofore cautious members of the Assembly. Committees were hastily formed to bring relief to beleaguered Boston and the ubiquitous McKean became a prominent member of one such committee established on May 29, 1774, by the freeholders of New Castle County. He also sought to marshal opinion behind a militant but constitutional protest. On June 17, 1774, signing himself “A Freeman,” he appealed to the people of New Castle to meet at the court house twelve days later to consider the proper mode of procuring relief for their “brethren” in Boston. Maintaining that further discussion of British legislation for the last ten years was unnecessary, for it was too well known and severely felt to require reiteration, he did dwell at some length on the most recent events in Boston and New York. He emphasized that the depressing developments in New England, though unbelievable, were “no phantoms arising from a heated brain,” and concluded by asking, “shall the people of this large and wealthy county, heretofore the foremost on many occasions . . . to oppose all attempts to deprive them of their personal security and private property, be now inactive and silent?” McKean’s role as a long-standing member of the committee of correspondence was by this time having an impact on his thinking. It would be difficult to exaggerate McKean’s philosophical indebtedness to his tenure as one of his colony’s prime agents in communicating with other colonies. Increasingly his vocab-

41 Ibid., 16, 18, 19; Ryden, Letters, 38n.
42 Harold Hancock, The Delaware Loyalists (Wilmington, 1940), 4; Delaware Archives (Wilmington, 1911–1919), II, 985.
ulary and the pattern of his thought reflected the communications constantly passing through his hands. The fears of neighboring colonies became McKean’s; the rhetoric of their concern became his. 43

On Wednesday, June, 29, “upwards of five hundred” people met to discuss the call for relief of Boston. Always a powerful and persuasive speaker, McKean proved a logical choice to head the meeting. Chosen unanimously to chair it, he opened the deliberations with a lengthy address reviewing the original compacts made by the several Kings with the first settlers of America on behalf of Great Britain, and the constitutional rights of the colonists as freemen and English subjects. He then stressed the violations of those original compacts and the systematic invasion of those rights, before describing the current distress in Boston. The mass gathering responded by passing seven resolutions, including an urgent commitment to begin a subscription for the relief of Boston, and a determination that the speaker of the Delaware Assembly should take it upon himself in view of the adjournment of that body to call upon individual members to meet in New Castle no later than the first of August. It then named a New Castle committee of thirteen, headed by McKean, to oversee that county’s response to new developments. George Read recorded that “not a sign of dissent appeared.” 44

Though similar expressions of unanimity were sought in Kent and Sussex Counties, disturbing signs appeared. The historic animosity between Kent and Sussex on the one hand and New Castle on the other, reasserted itself, the jealousy and suspicion in this instance stemming from the prominence of New Castle County in the determination of policy. Caesar Rodney wrote to Read that “they [the people of Sussex] are so offended at your fixing the mode and place, but more especially the place That they are determined not to fall in With your Plans.” Rodney was somewhat embarrassed to relate, too, that his own county, Kent, was seriously split. On July 11, the New Castle County committee implored the Assembly to appoint representatives to a general colonial congress to discuss the deteriora-

43 Pennsylvania Gazette, June 29, 1774. For evidence of McKean’s authorship, see Peeling, “The Life of Thomas McKean,” 23.

tion of conditions in Boston. In so doing, it was acting more slowly and less fervently than most committees in other colonies but its action still seemed precipitous to many in Kent and Sussex Counties. Nonetheless, amidst steadily mounting dissension, Kent and Sussex Counties were eventually dragged into line by the end of July and joined New Castle County in designating the Assembly as a convention capable of appointing representatives to a general congress.

The lack of enthusiasm exhibited by Sussex and Kent Counties for a more positive program of resistance convinced McKean of the need to expand his own activities. On July 28, he traveled to Lewes, Sussex County, where, before one of the largest popular meetings held in Delaware to that time, he enumerated colonial rights and inveighed against the recent British "lawless usurpations" of those liberties. He argued the wisdom of calling a general congress, perhaps a permanent congress, to clarify, regain, and then protect American rights. The impact of rhetoric and ideas emanating from other colonies, especially Massachusetts, upon McKean is clear in his Lewes address. In reacting first to the Gaspee incident and later to the developments in Boston McKean had denounced the "systematic" usurpations of American liberties. Now for the first time he openly ascribed to a small coterie of disloyal Americans, English ministers, and members of Parliament, strategems to subvert American rights. "For about ten years past," he insisted, "the conduct of the British ministry, and a majority of Parliament seems to be one continual plan to rob us of our dearest liberties." As a result, McKean concluded, Americans had "gradually lost [their] free constitution." He attributed the "present undeserved frowns of the parent state" to the "base calumnies, wicked insinuations and most false misrepresentations of the Bernards, Hutchinsons, [and] Olivers. . . ." If McKean really believed in the presence of a conspiracy against American liberties, and it appears that he did, he shared in what Professor Bernard Bailyn assures us was a widespread assumption.

45 Caesar Rodney to Read, July 21, 1774, in Ryden, Letters, 41-42. For the background of the differences between Kent and Sussex on the one hand and New Castle on the other, see Munroe, Federalist Delaware, 72-73.


McKean conceded that most Americans wished to remain loyal to Great Britain despite numerous infringements on their rights. Addressing himself to the British leaders, he reminded them that people of less devotion would have revolted long ago. He then listed some twenty-seven grievances shared by Americans, ranging from burdensome economic restrictions to the conferring of honors on unworthy individuals, "a dreadful catalogue indeed." Finally, he pleaded for support of the general congress even if such a congress proposed a nonimportation agreement. Unquestionably anticipating such a move, McKean made it clear that he considered such an agreement an effective ploy in forcing England to respect American rights. His efforts at Lewes and in New Castle County establish McKean as a prime architect of Delaware's involvement in the Continental Congress.48

Despite the county appeals urging the Assembly to name delegates to the Congress, immediate action was impossible in view of the Assembly's adjournment. The speaker had no power to reconvene the Assembly, and the one person capable of calling a special session, the proprietary governor, had refused a similar request in Pennsylvania. Fortunately for the more radical elements, Rodney, as speaker, wisely decided to call an unofficial meeting, the members gathering at New Castle on August 1, and electing Read, Rodney, and McKean to represent the Lower Counties in Philadelphia.49

Instructions for the delegates drawn up and formalized on the following day declared Delaware's continued allegiance to the King and expressed the hope that Great Britain and the colonies would remain bound together by mutual respect. They reiterated the belief that Delawareans ought to have and enjoy all the liberties, privileges, and immunities of free and natural-born subjects of Great Britain, including the right to be taxed only by their own consent and the right to a fair trial in their own courts before their own peers. The instructions made it clear that in the recent past Britain had left few colonial rights inviolate. Despite this, the Assembly (or conven-

48 Am. Archives, I, 659. Phillip Davidson, the historian of American propaganda during the Revolution, considered McKean's efforts at Lewes "one of the really fine speeches of his career." See Propaganda and the American Revolution, 1763-1783 (Chapel Hill, 1941), 199.
49 Am. Archives, I, 663; Pennsylvania Packet, Aug. 8, 1774; Caesar Rodney to Charles Ridgely, July 21, 1774, in Ryden, Letters, 42-43. Six representatives from New Castle attended (its full complement) but only five from Sussex and four from Kent were present.
tion) proved prudent in its charge to its delegates. The three men were to see that "the connexion, which subsists between Great Britain and her Colonies, whereby they are made one people, . . . continue to the latest period of time." To this end they were to "prevail with the Deputies from the other Colonies to frame decent and becoming Petitions to His most gracious Majesty and both Houses of Parliament for the redress of all our grievances."50

The differences of opinion held by the various representatives who met at Philadelphia on September 5, 1774, concerning the proper temper and tone to assume in the forthcoming meetings, the overall strategy best designed for effective recourse of political and economic ills, and the stratagems to be employed within the meetings, became readily apparent. The delegates quickly divided on whether reconciliation or accommodation could best be achieved through another petition for redress, or whether resistance should be continued and perhaps even intensified. The choice of a meeting site and the selection of a secretary were the first unmistakable signs that those intent upon a more rigorous resistance toward the Mother Country were in the ascendancy. McKean, whose private practice had forced him after 1773 to spend almost as much time in Pennsylvania as in Delaware, and who, as a result, was intimately familiar with the local political scene, joined those delegates who successfully frustrated Joseph Galloway's plans to designate both the site and the secretary.51

The three Delaware delegates participated in differing degrees in the persistent maneuvering that preceded the initial meetings and complicated the later sessions. McKean's association with those noted for their "forwardness and zeal" began early. He was one of the first to welcome the Massachusetts delegation when it arrived in the city, and he was a frequent dining companion of John Adams

50 The instructions can be found in Ryden, Letters, 43. Because the meeting of the Assembly was "irregular," Rodney signed the instructions as "Chairman" rather than as the "Speaker."

and others of similar persuasion thereafter. Temperament, circumstance, and conviction eventually combined to push all three Delawareans toward an acquiescence of the Congress’ final program and approach, although this surface unanimity cloaked a variety of substantial emotional and strategic differences among them. Their mental hesitations notwithstanding, the three men eventually signed and endorsed the Congress’ work, including the “Plan of Association.” If they harbored any serious forebodings about their course of action, they remained silent on the fact. The evidence available to the historian intent upon determining just where McKean stood in the larger perimeter of choices available to those in Philadelphia dates from a later period. Seemingly his position was remarkably similar to that taken by John Adams with whom he worked closely. At least in later years Adams, who favored a more spirited response than either the followers of Joseph Galloway or John Dickinson, recalled that in 1774 Rodney and McKean were among those who saw “more clearly to the end of business than any others of the whole body.” He remembered that in the first Congress he and McKean had not disagreed on a single issue, a recollection that corresponded with McKean’s own. Less than two months before the commencement of the Congress, McKean had anticipated a vital element of the more radical faction’s program—the nonimportation pact—and had persuasively argued the efficacy of such an approach. Receptive to the writings and resolves of those characterized by their “forwardness and zeal” even before the Congress met, McKean’s commitment to a more vigorous course against England deepened as his contact with radicals within the Congress became more sustained. Congress eventually proved to be the vehicle by which McKean’s latent radicalism was liberated.

McKean to Mrs. McKean, Mar. 16, 1775, McKean Papers, HSP; Journals, I, 26.  
McKean was assigned to the committee committed to “State the rights of the Colonies in general, the several instances in which these rights are violated or infringed, and the means most proper to be pursued for obtaining a restoration of them.”  
McKean to John Adams, Nov. 8, 1779, McKean Papers, HSP; same to same, June 13, 1812, John Adams to John Jackson, Dec. 30, 1787, in Adams, Works, X, 14, 269.  
For a detailed discussion of McKean’s congressional career, see my “‘A Valuable Acquisition in Congress’: Thomas McKean, Delegate from Delaware to the Continental Congress, 1774–1783,” Pennsylvania History, XXXVIII (1971), 225–264.
Though the Delaware triumvirate was satisfied with the proceedings and programs emanating from Congress, and Delawareans sympathetic to their views sought to implement congressional goals through local committees, there were those in the Lower Counties who were unhappy. Concerned lest the policies instituted by Congress lead to either war with England or civil insurrection at home, the discontented element rapidly made its disaffection known. Even before Congress adjourned moves were made to repudiate congressional pronouncements if they reflected too militant a position. One "little ungreateful [sic] Scheme" also involved a concerted effort to deny Rodney his seat in the Assembly. In addition, prominent assemblymen like Charles Ridgely and Thomas Robinson took less pains to hide their distrust of congressionally-induced developments and men like McKean who supported them. The Continental Congress thus did for Delaware what the Stamp Act Congress had done for Pennsylvania and other colonies: it triggered serious personal divisiveness, transformed party alignments, and rendered old political issues obsolete. The division between Court and country factions, always tentative, slowly gave way to an alignment more reflective of a man's commitment to resist England's restrictive policies. Although his and Read's posts were more secure than Rodney's, because of New Castle's greater receptivity to the growing radicalism, McKean was neither ignorant nor unmindful of the fact that in the two southern counties "if the King's standard were now erected nine out of ten would repair to it."56 Nor was he unaware of the potential of the Anglican churches in his own county.

Religious factors seriously aggravated political conditions in Delaware. The struggle for religious supremacy in that colony by one group over another, and the differences in the various religious sects' loyalty to the Home Country exacerbated an already inflamed situation. Anglicans outnumbered other sects and the ties between England and that church were readily acknowledged by enemy and friend alike. The unanimity of the Presbyterians in espousing the colonial cause was in turn duly noted by Anglicans. "Although civil liberty was the ostensible object, the bait that was flung out to catch the populace at large and engage them in rebellion," contended one

Anglican observer in 1776, "yet it is now past all doubt that the abolition of the Church of England was one of the principal springs of the dissenting leaders’ conduct; and hence the unanimity of the dissenters in this business." It can be assumed with some confidence that McKean was among those emphasizing the threat of an Anglican bishop to arouse public opinion in the interest of colonial resistance. Whether he did so from an appreciation of the propaganda effect of conjoining the issues of temporal and spiritual tyranny, or whether he sincerely saw in the issue an actual threat to Delaware Presbyterians is not clear. What is demonstrable is that years after the Revolution McKean remembered the religious question to have been a pivotal issue in Delaware. According to his later account, the ministers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel “told their hearers, many of whom, especially in Sussex, were illiterate, ignorant and bigoted, that it [opposition to England on the part of the Scotch-Irish elements] was a plan of the Presbyterians to get their religion established!” The Anglican clergy realized, McKean contended, that if opposition to England degenerated into open rebellion, and “if America became an independent state or nation, their salary (between 50 and 60 pounds) would necessarily cease. . . . It was their interest, therefore to oppose the revolution, and they did oppose it, though with as much secrecy as practical.”

In light of the increasing violence and pressure in the Lower Counties, aimed at either aiding or frustrating the local committees enforcing congressional directives, it is interesting to note the attitude of the Assembly. On March 25, 1775, that body “unanimously”

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67 Charles Inglis, “State of the Anglo-American Church in 1776,” The Documentary History of New York (Albany, 1849), III, 1050–1051. The best account of religious conditions in Delaware during this period is Elizabeth Waterston, Churches in Delaware During the Revolution (Wilmington, 1925).

68 McKean to Adams, Nov. 15, 1813, in Adams, Works, X, 80–81.

approved the conduct of its congressional representatives after hearing an account of their activities. If divisions were present within the Assembly—and there are indications that they did exist—they were still not substantial enough at this time to keep McKean, Rodney, and Read from being reappointed on March 16 to represent Delaware in the second Congress scheduled for May 10. The instructions subsequently drawn up to guide the three men, however, still cautioned them to "studiously avoid . . . everything disrespectful or offensive to our most gracious Sovereign, or in any measure invasive of his just rights and prerogatives." These extremely prudent instructions differed significantly from the previous ones only in so far as they warned the delegates they were to "decently but firmly . . . urge the right of this Government to an equal Voice in Congress with the other Governments." McKean, tied to these Delaware instructions for his conduct in the Congress, nevertheless spent his full tenure in it as a permanent resident of Pennsylvania.

Why McKean chose to move to Philadelphia is not altogether clear. It is possible that in light of his growing legal responsibilities and connections there he considered the move simply one of convenience. More probably, frustrated by Delaware's limited opportunities, he saw his political and professional ambitions better served in cosmopolitan Philadelphia. McKean's leading role in Delaware's resistance to British measures was originally prompted by his sense of history and his appreciation of colonial rights within the empire. In addition to his Presbyterianism, which provided a sense of urgency to his conduct, his response was also later shaped by his

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60 McKean to Mrs. McKean, Mar. 16, 1775, McKean Papers, HSP; Journals, II, 12; Ryden, Letters, 55–56. John McKinley and Charles Ridgely, both cautious men, helped to write the instructions.

61 There is some question as to just when McKean moved permanently to Philadelphia. Various sources put the date anywhere from 1771 to 1775. John A. Munroe chooses two dates, 1771 and 1774. Alexander Graydon in his memoirs suggests that by 1774 McKean was one of the leading members of the Philadelphia bar. But the best evidence seems to suggest that while McKean had established temporary residence in Philadelphia as early as 1773, he did not move there permanently until some time just prior to the opening of the Continental Congress in 1775. McKean later claimed to have moved in 1773 but his statements elsewhere suggest he was in error here. See, Munroe, Federalist Delaware, 13; Munroe, "The Philadelphians: A Study in the Relations Between Philadelphia and Delaware in the Late Eighteenth Century," PMHB, LXIX (1945), 146; J. S. Littell, ed., Memoirs of Alexander Graydon (Philadelphia, 1846), 120; "Narrative," 77; McKean, "Autobiographical Sketch," 12.
personal and professional relations with powerful figures with whom he associated. But it was shaped, too, by considerations of personal gain. Delaware's peculiar political environment allowed it to reward McKean's ambitions, but only to a point. Philadelphia, on the other hand, provided a great many more opportunities for a man like McKean. It would be invidious to suggest that McKean ignored his earlier principles after 1775; that he was after that date a man driven solely by considerations of personal gain and influence. Indeed he was not. He remained firmly convinced of the justice of the colonial cause; in fact, his distrust of—even hatred toward—Great Britain increased with each passing month. But after 1775 the opportunity for office and the temptations of influence and fame more obviously complicated his decisions and eventually played a prominent role in leading him into a position that in the end he found untenable.

Regardless of his motives in moving to Pennsylvania, McKean had no intention of truncating his Delaware career, for he continued to foster economic, legal, and social interests in that province. And he continued to hold important political posts in its government.62

When in 1775 McKean sought to contribute his talents and convictions to the Whig cause in Philadelphia the city and province were torn between allegiance to legal and extra-legal bodies; the division between Quaker and non-Quaker elements was widening; and those who had been heretofore denied meaningful participation in politics were steadily becoming more vocal. Growing military confrontations between colonials and British regulars exacerbated the many differences of opinion. McKean's congressional directives urged caution in his approach to "the present unhappy disputes subsisting between [Delaware] and the Parent state," but his private career in Pennsylvania after 1775 exhibited no such prudence. Cognizant of the claim of many Pennsylvania Whigs that by 1775 the most serious efforts to press for a vigorous resistance to British restrictions had stemmed from the many extra-legal committees opposed to the Assembly, he soon aligned with those groups comprising the Assembly's position. In April, just one month before McKean joined Read and Rodney to represent Delaware in the Continental Congress, he joined one of the Assembly's potentially most dangerous competitors—the

62 "Narrative," 77. For McKean's later Delaware career, see Rowe, "Power, Politics, and Public Service," chapters 4, 5, 9, 12.
Associators. He became a private in Captain John Little’s Company of the 2nd Battalion of Philadelphia.63

Although the personnel of the Congress which met on May 10, 1775, did not differ markedly from its predecessor, the tasks facing these men were quite dissimilar. With war now existing in actual if not official form, McKean and the delegates were called upon to encourage military preparations in their own provinces, to raise a national army, and to continue the delicate and frustrating reconciliation efforts as well. McKean was amply qualified for the new mood and talents demanded by this Congress. “By habit and inclination [a] man of business,” he had the requisite dedication to often minuscule and tedious tasks, an exceptional sense of organization, and an inexhaustibility which stood him in good stead among his colleagues. Accordingly, he quickly became a valued member of that body: in the thirteen months between the opening of the second Congress and its declaration of America’s independence, McKean was named, by his own account, to “Four standing Committees besides occasional ones.” In point of fact, at one time he found himself chairing five committees and being a member of thirty-three others. As important as the number of assignments he received was the type of duties entrusted to him. The problems and responsibilities of such prestigious committees as Account and Claims, Prisoners, Qualifications, Treasury, and the Secret Committee, became his.64 Even while identifying McKean’s many assignments, the records of that body fail to convey the wide range of duties and the full scope of influence that must have been his. But if there were other men in Congress during this period more privy to the innermost workings of that body they are not readily identifiable. Undeniably, McKean’s many assignments were a burden to him and to his family, but they were also a source of considerable pride. He collected committee assignments as eagerly as he had earlier collected honors in Delaware. When he wrote in the beginning of 1776 that he was “almost worn

63 Ryden, Letters, 56. See the list of those over eighteen willing to bear arms in the Middle Ward of Philadelphia, dated May 1, 1775, and the roll of Little’s Company dated April, 1775, in Clymer MSS, 4, 7–8, HSP.

down . . . owing to the multiplicity of business," it was as much to convey his status in Congress as to detail his physical or mental well-being.65

McKean was not disappointed in his quest for greater political influence and more substantial personal achievement in Pennsylvania. Vaulting himself into events with his usual abandon, he was one of the men who, along with Timothy Matlack, David Rittenhouse, James Cannon, and Christopher Marshall, found in the troubled waters of Revolutionary Pennsylvania the source of their own political ascendency. The congressional recess in August gave him ample opportunity to involve himself more intimately in local Pennsylvania affairs and on the eighteenth of that month he was appointed, along with Joseph Reed, George Clymer, and Samuel Mere-dith, chairman of the Philadelphia Committee of Inspection and Observation.66 When, in subsequent months, the Philadelphia Quakers petitioned the Pennsylvania Assembly to exempt them from all military preparations, and earnestly entreated that body to "guard against any Proposal or Attempt to deprive us and others of the full Enjoyment of Liberty or Conscience," it was McKean and Clymer who presented a counter-memorial.

The memorial, delivered to the Assembly by McKean and Clymer asserted that the Quaker petition "bears an Aspect unfriendly to the Liberties of America and maintains Principles destructive to all Society and Government. . . ." The memorial went on to warn the Assembly that,

If the Patrons and Friends of Liberty succeed in the present glorious Struggle, they and their Posterity will enjoy all the Advantages derived from it, equally with those who procured them, without contributing a single Penny, and with Safety to their Persons. If the Friends of Liberty fail, they will risk no Forfeitures, but be entitled by their Behavior to Protection and Countenance from the British Ministry, and will probably be promoted to Office.

The memorial assumed that "Self-preservation is the first Principle of Nature, and a Duty that every Man indissolubly owes not only

to himself, but the Supreme Director and Governor of the Universe . . .,” and criticized the Quakers for failing to adhere to Man’s “original Compact and Agreement” to defend themselves and their community against those who “attempt unlawfully to deprive them of their just Rights and Liberties.” By November, 1775, McKean had thus placed himself in opposition to the Anglicans in Delaware, whom he believed hindered the colonial cause through their aggressive attachment to England, and to those Quakers in Pennsylvania whose passivity posed a barrier to effective resistance against British restrictions. In spite of the memorial’s concentration in this instance on the military ramifications of the Quakers’ “conscience,” McKean’s overall opposition to the Quakers seems to have stemmed primarily from what he considered their unfair political domination.

“My God!” Charles Lee wrote to Benjamin Rush in some exasperation late in 1775, “Why does not your whole Province arouse themselves, kick the Assembly from the seat of representation which they so horribly disgrace and set ’em to work German Town Stockings for the Army—an employment manly enough for ’em.” By February, 1776, not only McKean but a great many Pennsylvanians were intent on putting at least part of Lee’s advice into effect. In that very month McKean’s activities and rhetoric convinced Edward Tilghman that he had joined “the violents.” Certainly, McKean enthusiastically cast his lot with those members of the Committee of Observation who planned to challenge more blatantly the Assembly’s role in Pennsylvania’s political life. The Committee’s plans, formulated on February 28 and 29, consisted in part of calling a province-wide conference to meet on April 2, ostensibly to seek the true will of the people. A mixture of shock and confusion naturally greeted this move, many Whigs sharing Joseph Shippen’s fear that “such a Step would certainly be productive of the greatest Confusion

68 Note his later activities and his observations to Adams. McKean to Adams, Sept. 28, 1813, in Adams, Works, 73.
Anarchy & Disunion.” If Shippen was correct, as many thought he was, McKean did not fear the results, or was convinced that current exigencies left no reasonable alternative to the Committee’s efforts. John Dickinson, Joseph Reed, Thomas Mifflin and Robert Morris might still hope that effective resistance to English encroachments did not necessitate the destruction of the ancient charter of the province but McKean entertained no such illusion. He was willing to contribute personally to the dismantling of the legitimate colonial government if by his actions he could secure a more responsive agency toward recent congressional moves and a more equitable political representation in Pennsylvania. McKean’s acquiescence in the rapidly blurring line between legal and extra-legal authority was based more, however, on his desire for an effective colonial program in the imperial dispute than on any hope for a widespread social revolution.71

Early in May, 1776, McKean’s role in Pennsylvania politics and that of the Continental Congress were perceptibly altered. On March 4 a temporary halt to the ideas of a convention had been achieved through the efforts of moderate Whigs who wrung enough concessions from the Assembly to pacify their more ardent brethren. Later, on May 1, the more radical element failed to carry the hotly contested Assembly elections, and these two developments—the failure of the more zealous Whigs to either dominate the Assembly or supplant it as the principal political voice in the province—convinced many militant Pennsylvanians that unless a new impetus was quickly found whatever momentum their movement might have attained to this point would be lost. It was to Congress that they now looked. Congress therefore took on a somewhat different role in Pennsylvania society, and as an influential member of that body by virtue of his many committee assignments, and as a man intimately connected with the radical cause in Pennsylvania, McKean’s role also changed. He became an important liaison between local radicals and those radicals within Congress, as men like Christopher Marshall, James Cannon, and Thomas Young conferred with him at critical moments. It is now impossible to establish how closely McKean’s activities in Pennsylvania were watched by Delawareans, but, if his

71 Joseph Shippen to Edward Shippen, Feb. 29, 1776, Shippen Papers, XII, 123, HSP.
course was charted, it could not have brought much comfort to a large segment of Delaware society.\textsuperscript{72}

Congress was not long in providing the necessary momentum desired by Pennsylvania's popular leaders. On May 10 it adopted John Adams' resolution to the effect that "respective assemblies and conventions of the United Colonies [should] where no government sufficient to the exigencies of their affairs have been hitherto established . . . adopt such government as shall, in the opinion of the representatives of the people, best conduce to the happiness and safety of the constituents in Particular and America in general." A preamble to the resolve, added on May 15, established that it was "absolutely irreconcilable to reason and good Conscience, for the people of these colonies now to take the oaths and affirmations necessary for the support of any government under the crown . . . ."\textsuperscript{73} McKean was not among those in Congress responsible either for the original resolution or its preamble, but he associated closely with the resolution's authors and friends, and he quickly championed the completed act in the ensuing debate. Eight months earlier McKean had confided to Adams that he "had no Idea of any Right or Authority in Parliament." Now in the heated discussion accompanying the passage of the resolution he urged his congressional colleagues to recognize that "There are 2 Governments in direct Opposition to each other." He admonished them that, unless they supported such a step as the May 10–15 resolve, "We shall Loose [sic] our Liberties Properties and Lives Too."\textsuperscript{74}

It is not clear just what McKean considered the resolve meant in terms of Delaware's political life, but there was little doubt about its consequences in Pennsylvania. Men of all political persuasions in that province understood that the May 10–15 resolve ultimately meant a convention of the people, one that would, as James Allen expressed it, "consist of the most fiery independents [who] will have the whole executive and legislative authority in their hands."\textsuperscript{75} McKean and the popular leaders did not even wait to see how, or

\textsuperscript{73} Journals, IV, 342, 357–358.
\textsuperscript{75} "Diary of James Allen," \textit{PMHB}, IX (1885), 186–187.
if, the Assembly would respond to the rapidly changing conditions. On the same day that Congress adopted the preamble, McKean chaired a meeting “where was debated the resolve . . . respecting the taking up and forming new governments in the different colonies.” In light of his activities to this point, there can be little doubt of the direction in which the chair leaned in this gathering—a vital element in determining the eventual outcome of any meeting. On the following day he joined with those who met and voted to call a convention “with speed” and to insist on the Assembly not acting until the sense of the province could be determined in a province-wide convention. He also concurred with those who called still another public meeting, this for the State House yard on May 20. On the very day the Pennsylvania Assembly convened in a desperate effort to retain control of events, McKean met with some 4,000 people to debate further the congressional resolve and its implications for the people of Pennsylvania. As a principal speaker at the May 20 gathering, McKean declared the Assembly no longer worthy of respect, noting that it had refused to reconsider such acts as its congressional instructions on November 9, 1775, despite being petitioned by the people to that end. No longer could any faith be put in members of that body, he insisted, in light of their indifference to the people’s true will. Following McKean’s comments, plans were prepared for a convention and representatives chosen to take the news to the people in the backcountry. From the point of view of the popular leaders, the meeting was a rousing success. The opponents of its stand were left to grumble about being “insulted and abused” when they sought to speak.

As chairman of the Committee of Observation for the city and liberties of Philadelphia, McKean signed, and probably drafted, a memorial to the Assembly reminding it that the Assembly had withdrawn from its union with Congress as a consequence of its refusal to change its congressional instructions and its refusal to accept dutifully the May 10–15 resolve. The Assembly had no right to restrain its congressional delegates, it was told. Besides, because the Assembly did not “contain a full and equal representation of the province,” it was not the “legitimate agency of power.” The petition

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76 Marshall, Diary, 80, 82; Pennsylvania Gazette, May 22, 1776; Pa. Colonial Records, X, 548.
77 Pennsylvania Gazette, May 22, 1776.
then dismissed the Assembly’s alleged support of the Whig cause, observing that its members had “been drugged into compliance with most of the Resolutions of the Congress from a fear of a Provincial Convention.” The timid and trimming politics of the Assembly in the face of repeated injuries at the hands of Parliament had convinced McKean, as it had convinced other popular leaders, that the Assembly could no longer demand respect or authority. The position to which McKean adhered here—that congressional representatives should be the delegates of the people of Pennsylvania rather than of their Assembly—while increasingly acceptable to a large number of Pennsylvanians, was contrary to the supposition guiding his activities in Delaware.78

To continue its initiative against the conservative Assembly and its authority, the committee on June 3 sent another memorial signed by McKean, this to the justices of the quarter sessions for the city and liberties of Philadelphia, asking them to terminate the authority of the courts until such time as a new government could be framed upon the true authority of the people. He left no comment on this specific act in his private papers but it must have been with considerable reluctance that McKean, dedicated to the law and the judiciary as he was, challenged the Pennsylvania courts. However, as a man ardently pursuing colonial rights he saw the wisdom of suspending a vital arm of the Assembly’s power.79

Earlier, McKean had traveled to the backcountry to carry the news of the congressional resolutions to the people and to urge ratification of the proposed convention. He is known to have been in Reading on May 29 but his exact route cannot now be reconstructed. He had returned by June 10 when, with some satisfaction, he successfully urged his 4th Battalion of Associators (he was by this time “Colonel McKean,” a rapid advance in a little more than a year) to join the other city battalions in accepting the congressional resolve and the proceedings of the May 10 meeting.80

78 Pennsylvania Packet, May 27, 1776; Pennsylvania Gazette, May 29, 1776; Pennsylvania Journal, Nov. 22, 1775. For McKean’s view of representation, especially concerning his congressional career in Delaware, see my “‘A Valuable Acquisition in Congress:’ Thomas McKean, Delegate from Delaware to the Continental Congress, 1774-1783,” Pennsylvania History, XXXVIII (1971), 225-264.
79 Am. Archives, VI, 689; Pennsylvania Gazette, June 5, 1776.
80 David Hawke, In the Midst of a Revolution (Philadelphia, 1961), 146; Marshall, Diary, 871 Pennsylvania Packet, June 17, 1776.
Rush, elated enough to write that “our cause prospers in every county of the province,” attributed much of the success to McKean, telling his wife that the true Whigs were relying “chiefly upon Colonel McKean and a few more of us for the salvation of the province.”

Disaffection within Delaware had substantially increased following the acceptance by Congress of the May 10–15 resolution urging the colonies to form new governments. Even before they heard the disturbing news of the resolution’s passage, many Delawareans were openly espousing the British cause. The division between Whig and Tory became more pronounced although the groups were still pliable and the use of the terms unsettled. As early as January many of “the Principle [sic] gentlemen” of Delaware were actively assisting British naval personnel in the Delaware River and seeking advice from them in return on how best to blunt the Revolutionary cause in their colony. The local Whig committees worked diligently (and often brutally) to impose their will on an often reluctant population, but neither they nor the sympathetic congressional onlookers were optimistic. One ardent Delaware Whig was convinced that only by disarming a large part of the populations of Kent and Sussex could Congress assert its will there. Despite his greater proximity with events in Pennsylvania McKean never lost sight of events in Delaware, and he remained that colony’s principal liaison with the national government. It was he who, on June 13, reported to Congress the critical conditions in Sussex County when Tories in that area openly challenged congressional authority and seriously disconcerted the local Assembly.

It was McKean, too, who, on June 14, placed before the Delaware Assembly (he was still a member of that body as well as one of its congressional delegates) an official copy of the May 10–15 resolution and argued its acceptance. Despite the opposition of large majorities in Kent and Sussex Counties, and divisions in the Assembly itself over the measure, the Assembly approved the resolution “unani-

82 Hancock, Delaware Loyalists, 7–12; John Haslet to Caesar Rodney, May ?, 1776, in Ryden, Letters, 87.
mously."^84 Much of the credit for this willingness on the part of the legislature to approve the resolution belongs to Caesar Rodney, who used his considerable influence to see that Delaware Whigs worked through the Assembly in this matter rather than, as the more radical Pennsylvania Whigs were seeking to do, through a convention of the people. Evidence of McKean's preference in this matter is lacking, but, whatever means he considered the most conducive to achieving a positive response to the congressional actions, he was obviously elated by the Assembly's move on June 15 to suspend the proprietary government, and by its resolve that "all persons holding any office, civil and military, in this colony . . . shall continue to execute the same, in the name of the government of the counties of New Castle, Kent and Sussex upon Delaware . . . until a new government shall be formed." He took comfort, too, in the Assembly's new instructions for its congressional delegates, the wording of which, while not explicitly directing a vote for independence, allowed latitude for such a move.\(^85\) That McKean interpreted the instructions as giving him the power to cast his ballot for independence when Congress should officially consider such a resolution is clear. Following his return to Philadelphia, his close friend and colleague, John Adams, convinced of McKean's intentions, recorded the good news that McKean had returned with "full powers."\(^86\)

On the day that he presented the May 10–15 resolution to the Delaware Assembly and pleaded for its acceptance, the Committee of Observation and Inspection for the city and liberties of Philadelphia elected McKean and twenty-four others to represent it in

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^84 The extant records indicate a "unanimous" vote here but it, like many "unanimous" votes, actually represented a final effort to hide divisions after bitter disagreements had taken place, and a majority determined. Other members of the Assembly had no doubt concluded with Rodney that the May 10–15 resolution "savor[ed]" of independence and it is clear that serious opposition to independence existed in Delaware and among those present in the Assembly. McKean maintained that the majority of Delawareans opposed independence even after July, 1776. See, Ryden, *Letters*, 77–88, 91; McKean to Adams, Nov. 13, 1813, in Adams, *Works*, X, 81–82.


^86 John Adams to Samuel Chase, June 14, 1776, in Adams, *Works*, IX, 398. Adams' letter, though dated on the 14th was probably written on the 16th or, perhaps, as late as the 18th. There is no direct evidence to indicate exactly when McKean first decided to support a vote for independence, but it appears to have been sometime late in 1775 or early in 1776. By February, 1776, he seemed committed.
the forthcoming convention. Four days later delegates representing twelve committees throughout Pennsylvania were brought together at Carpenters' Hall to lay the groundwork for a constituent convention. As chairman of the local organization playing host to the other committees, McKean opened the meeting, using the occasion to review the events and motives leading to the present gathering. He was then elected the permanent president, although there is some indication that he was in fact the convention's second choice. McKean's prestige and influence in Pennsylvania political affairs had steadily expanded as the Committee of Observation had methodically increased in size and force. He could not have been unmindful of that fact. It is ironic, however, that McKean assumed the titular leadership in the convention, not at the moment his views were most thoroughly representative of those in attendance, but rather when they were rapidly becoming incompatible with—or at least too limited for—the ultimate aims of the majority of convention members. The convention's subsequent actions and later developments indicate clearly that the impetus and momentum was swinging inexorably to those people desirous of going far beyond what McKean sought to achieve through the struggle against Great Britain. McKean remained one of the ostensible leaders of the convention and he continued to help draft and sign the addresses emanating from it, but he no longer represented the true direction of that body. The growing radicalism in Pennsylvania had steadily taken its toll of established leaders and prominent figures, and, though he probably did not know it, McKean by late June had become its latest victim. The great majority of convention members were now intent on revolutionizing Pennsylvania society in a manner unacceptable to McKean. To demand a more equitable representational balance in the Pennsylvania Assembly or to insist upon an Assembly truly responsive to the Whig cause was one thing, to advocate radical innovations, to seriously rend the political and social fabric, was quite another.

87 Marshall, Diary, 88–89; Pennsylvania Packet, June 17, 1776; Pa. Archives, Second Series, III, 557, 559. Professor Hawke (In the Midst of a Revolution, 172) argues that the ill and absent Franklin was the convention's first choice.

88 Increasingly, the members of the June convention and those in Pennsylvania who most ardently supported their efforts looked forward to a triumph of democracy—a truly
David Hawke has argued that "As the only veteran politician present [McKean] should have sensed the trend of affairs in Pennsylvania and attempted to head it back to more moderate channels." The criticism is valid. It is true that most of the memorials issued by the radical committees before the convention and the addresses produced by the June convention itself seemed on the surface more concerned with either British provocation or American independence than with encouraging an internal revolution. In this sense McKean's adherence to the movement was legitimate and understandable. But McKean was too intelligent to miss what others less astute, others less involved with the movement, saw. He was too alert not to realize that increasingly there was more to the radical movement in Pennsylvania than that implied by its official pronouncements. Public utterances by the more zealous Whigs with whom he associated made abundantly clear what they anticipated for the future of the province. He was aware, too, that public addresses as often mask as clarify the true sentiments of those responsible for them. He had himself for strategic reasons continued to stress reconciliation long after he had opted for independence. It is possible that he shared James Allen's earlier assumption that "discreet people mixing with [the more ardent multitude] may keep them in order." More probably, McKean's myopia can be charged in part to his almost fanatical drive to insure that the most aggressive policies possible were pursued vis à vis England, and in part to his fondness for the attention and power accorded him by the radicals.

leveling democracy, but McKean favored a continuation of deferential politics. He simply wanted to substitute a new coalition of interests for the old Quaker interests. If a more democratic underpinning would produce a more effective framework for deferential politics, he would support such a course. McKean's whole career testifies to his greater emphasis on who was elected rather than who did the electing.

For the convention's pronouncements establishing the ground rules for the upcoming constituent assembly, see Pa. Archives, Second Series, III, 559-563, 575; Pennsylvania Packet, July 1, 1776. Note the emphasis on having the people choose as their representatives men "distinguished for wisdom [and] integrity...." McKean followed a somewhat ambiguous policy regarding "new men" in Pennsylvania politics. As a "new man" himself he did not fear replacement of the current leaders with heretofore unknown political figures, but he always maintained that the "better sorts"—men whose experience, education, or talents, set them apart—should govern.

Recognition by McKean of the extent of his alienation from those now directing the destinies of Pennsylvania politics, or at least a public indication of it, came later. Not until the following October, when he had occasion to read the constitution produced by the constitutional convention he had done so much to found, did he fully sense the degree to which he was out of step with the current leaders. In the meantime, from June 18 to July 8, he continued to work through Congress to achieve his primary goal; by June that goal was to commit Delaware to a policy of separation. If the question of independence in Pennsylvania was too closely tied to the issue of a social revolution and thus more complex and unpredictable, developments in Delaware were more within McKean's grasp. Here no democratic thrust, no threat of social upheaval compromised to the degree it did in Pennsylvania the question of whether or not America should declare its separation from Great Britain. By June the issue had not been resolved by the people of Delaware, but the divisions on the question in the Lower Counties were for the most part determined by a man's attitude on that fundamental question, not by the implications and threats of auxiliary issues. Delaware thus presented to McKean a clearer picture than did Pennsylvania. He could to a greater degree personally make policy there, for his power and influence were still greater in Delaware than in Pennsylvania. Equally important, his congressional directives by June allowed him latitude enough to vote for independence whenever Congress should entertain such a resolution, and through his vote, and that of Rodney who seemed to see as clearly as did McKean the need for such a step, Delaware could be committed officially to independence. Whether or not its people would accept such a decision willingly was another matter. Nevertheless, a vote in Congress could achieve the former, military aid from the national government might sustain the latter.  

The opportunity for McKean to act decisively for separation came on July 1 when Congress first resolved to consider a vote on the Lee Resolution of June 7. The issue initially had been postponed until a time more propitious for its success, but even as late as July 1 there

was some doubt of its fate. One dimension of that doubt was provided by Delaware and its delegation. Although McKean had been “suspected of independency” as early as February, conditions in the Lower Counties were still not thought conducive to a patriot victory there. Disregarding a last minute forecast of disaster, should Congress vote separation, made by his old friend John Dickinson, McKean supported the Lee Resolution in the vote that followed. The initial concern regarding Delaware’s warmth for independence was justified when George Read, convinced that the move was precipitous, opposed the resolution thus negating McKean’s affirmative vote and splitting the attending Delaware delegation on the matter. Because the Pennsylvania and South Carolina delegations were in opposition and the representatives from New York still lacked proper instructions, it was determined to postpone a formal vote until the following day. To break the tie in his own delegation and to throw his colony on the side of those supporting the resolution, McKean on the night of July 1 sent for the agreeable Rodney who, not anticipating the vote, had remained at his Kent farm. When Rodney, after a long and now famous ride, arrived on the second to join with McKean in voting for independence, McKean was elated. He subsequently participated in the acceptance by Congress of Jefferson’s document on July 4, before leaving for Perth Amboy at the head of his battalion of Associators to lend whatever military aid he could to the American cause.  

The vote to sever America’s ties with England was not taken lightly by anyone connected with it. But if the decision to declare American independence created in George Read a sense of disquietude and in Dickinson a foreboding of doom, it brought only exhilaration to McKean. If many Americans saw in the congressional vote only the last of many unwarranted and precipitous acts, to McKean it was the culmination of a cautious and logical development. Many delegates feared that the rebellion would elicit a demand

92 Journals, V, 505-507, 519-520. McKean’s military career can be followed in Rowe, “Power, Politics, and Public Service,” chapter 4. With the passing of the years, McKean played down the disappointments he experienced in 1776, especially those disappointments centering around the constitutions created by the Pennsylvania and Delaware constitutional conventions of 1776. He did continue to take most of the credit for the Delaware constitution of 1776, however. Ibid., 90-92, 96-115.
for power by "new men"; McKeans thought the cause worth the risk. For a great many observers Congress' actions gave rise to bewilderment over the loss of a way of life familiar to them, over the termination of a fruitful and mutually satisfactory partnership between England and the colonies. For McKeans, it marked a beginning. That beginning warranted the strained relations with old-time friends like Dickinson, the destruction of long-standing imperial institutions, and the threat of social chaos inherent in his vote for independence. In the last days of his tumultuous life, some forty-one years after he and Rodney had cast their votes for separation, McKeans's complicity in that act still burned bright in his memory. To the day of his death he considered it a pivotal event in his life—and in the history of Mankind. And well he might.

One can not describe in full detail the trail by which McKeans came to his eventual decision to support American independence by alluding solely to the role of ideas in his career or to the intellectual climate in which he lived. Unquestionably ideas—McKeans's sense of history, his appreciation of the British constitution, his understanding of the limits on Parliament's power and his acceptance of dark conspiratorial designs against American liberties—loomed large in his motivation; perhaps they played a central role. It is obvious that McKeans shared the configuration of values and ideas transmitted most directly to the colonies by early eighteenth-century radical English Whigs. It is clear, too, that he shared the pervasive Whig sense of history that played such a fundamental role in preparing the colonists for revolution. Local conditions in Delaware added weight to Whig interpretations and assumptions. Its own history, its geographical conditions, its religious make-up, as well as its political development produced an environment conducive to the planting and nourishment of such ideas. But factors other than the intellectual milieu, very cogent factors, contributed their own part to McKeans's growing radicalism. Colonial resistance to alleged British usurpation of American rights gave rise to opportunity. Colonial opposition to

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93 The last years of his life were filled with opportunities to answer questions concerning the happenings in 1776 and to enlarge upon his own role in those trying times. See, for instance, Jared Ingersoll to Joseph McKeans, May 8, 1817, Brown Collection, HSD; McKeans to Thomas Sergeant, May 22, 1814, Society Collection, HSP; Joseph McKeans to Samuel M. McKeans, June 4, 1817, Brown Collection, HSD.
the early Grenville program and to the programs that followed allowed a man of McKean's abilities, desire, and energy to bloom, to achieve. Delaware's diligence in responding to British measures, while certainly neither as quick nor as ardent as that found in many of the colonies, demanded resourceful men, men who could—and would—expend time and energy in its behalf. For a man of McKean's ambition, fed as it was by his personal needs and the needs of Delaware's political and judicial life, the situation was ideal. It provided him with what he sought—greater fame, wider influence and an ever increasing circle of interests—and it whet his appetite for more. Yet, in the end the people of Delaware received far more from McKean than the distinctions they accorded him. 94

Introduced to Revolutionary Pennsylvania society first through his legal interests and later his congressional obligations, McKean quickly recognized the opportunities it held for a man of his intelligence and ability. He needed by 1775 an arena far larger than that provided by the Lower Counties in which to pursue his personal goals. The opportunities and temptations afforded him by the ever changing political scene in Pennsylvania increasingly complicated McKean's life, and at times detracted from his original priorities. Recognized for his personal commitment to the American cause, useful for his drafting and oratorical skills, and admittedly a firm and effective handler of large public gatherings, he was seen by Pennsylvania and Delaware Whigs alike as a valuable asset to their cause. But he was not a seminal thinker, a political philosopher; instead, he was a man who responded to specific conditions in a direct and practical manner. He was not so prescient as to be capable of reckoning ends and means. And, like many men in those turbulent times, he found that the distinction between intellectual commitments and personal goals was not always as clear as it might be. The pre-Revolutionary years, somewhat ambiguously, were for men like McKean a time of lost liberties and greater opportunities.

In the final analysis McKean was driven in the imperial contest essentially by a firm belief in the justice of the colonial cause, by a belief that England was purposely pursuing an arbitrary course in

94 See my article on McKean's congressional career in Pennsylvania History, XXXVIII (1971), for an examination of McKean's contributions to, and rewards in, Delaware's political affairs.
her relations with the colonies. His sense of history and his personal ambition might have encouraged his involvement in the Whig cause, but his appreciation of specific wrongs, repeated specific wrongs, explains his continuing ardor and his ultimate acceptance of independence. It was as a member of Congress that McKean most intimately and continually grappled with the "lawless usurpations" against American rights. And it was as a congressman that he was able, in July, 1776, to strike his most personal telling blow against what he seriously construed to be tyranny.

McKean was a complex and even enigmatic man reacting to rapidly changing conditions and to often insoluble problems. He was a man at times controlling his temper and passions, at times being controlled by them. He was a man at times self-serving, at times completely devoted to the cause. The path by which he reached his final commitment to American independence reflected the confusion and complexity of the man and his times. Any history of the Revolutionary generation which ignores this fact of life concerning the participants of the American Revolution is no history at all.

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