

Thomas Willing: A Study in Moderation, 1774-1778

PATRIOTS of the American Revolution have enjoyed a good press. Today Loyalists receive deserved historical consideration. But many other colonials fit uncomfortably between these two groups. Whether indifferent, indecisive, or conciliatory, these Americans have not commanded comparable scrutiny on an individual basis. The reasons for this neglect are obvious: often their roles were secondary at best, research material is less available, and consequently interest in their attitudes and exploits is less intense. But these people were not merely idle spectators. Among those warranting closer study for the moderate position they took was a prominent Philadelphian, Thomas Willing.¹ Between 1774 and 1778, he headed commercial petitions against British trade policy, sat in the Second Continental Congress, where he voted against independence, remained in Philadelphia during the occupation, strove to reconcile imperial and colonial differences, and eventually swore allegiance to Pennsylvania, but not before he had come under suspicion for treason from both sides.

Though his commitment to independence had come late and with reluctance, he emerged from the war unscathed and respected. That there were others like him raises the question as to the true nature of a successful revolution. Without moderates like Willing, does such an event have staying powers?

Willing became a supporter of the protest movement chiefly out of economic self-interest, certainly not a unique reason. His political actions and attitudes deserve examination because he may be most

¹ Between 1754 and 1774 Willing established a successful merchant house, Willing and Morris. A member of the Philadelphia elite, he held numerous public offices, including assistant secretary of the Pennsylvania delegation to the 1754 Albany Congress, assemblyman, commissioner for trade with the Indians, city common council member, and supreme court judge.

representative of the wealthy neutralists in the early stages of the Revolution. He had to measure his steps carefully, lest he lose his business and his influential position in the community. How much involvement could he afford and still remain secure? He did not approve of British taxation, yet he did not favor separation. How he reacted and why during this crisis is important to a more complete understanding of the American spirit of independence, which is not to be appreciated solely in the actions and words of a Samuel Adams.

Between 1770 and his appointment to the Second Continental Congress in 1775, Willing presided over two important meetings. One repealed the embargo of 1769, except for tea. The other session recognized the plight of Boston, following the closing of its port in 1774, and urged the petitioning of Great Britain to give the mother country ample opportunity to appease colonial grievances before more drastic resistance was adopted. The session further recommended that the colonies pay for the damaged tea if Britain complied with the petition. Moderation prevailing, Boston's request for the calling of a Continental Congress was ignored.²

Later, when plans were laid for Pennsylvania's representation at a Congress, Willing offered his services. On June 10, 1774, he was one of a committee of fifty-one selected to draw up instructions for the members of the state delegation as to their conduct in redressing colonial grievances.³ Willing and John Dickinson⁴ chaired the general town meetings held to discuss and implement the state's participation in the Congress. Despite their leadership, the radicals controlled the tempo. Although Willing was named to the forty-four-member Committee of Correspondence, the majority of the committee clearly supported radical Charles Thomson.⁵ Later, Willing headed the Provincial Convention which chose the delegates to the

² Theodore Thayer, *Pennsylvania Politics and the Growth of Democracy, 1740-1776* (Harrisburg, 1953), 155.

³ John Dickinson Papers, Robert R. Logan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).

⁴ Burton Alva Konkle's contention that Dickinson obviously was vice-chairman is not supportable. There often was more than one presiding officer at these meetings. Burton Alva Konkle, *Thomas Willing and the First American Financial System* (Philadelphia, 1937), 65.

⁵ *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* (Philadelphia), June 22, 1774; J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* (Philadelphia, 1884), I, 290.

Congress and instructed the state Assembly on the will of the people.⁶

Some of Willing's personal reactions to the political developments of this period emerged in an exchange with his friend General Frederick Haldimand. Shortly after the First Continental Congress had convened, the General aimed sharp barbs, primarily at Massachusetts radicals. Writing from New York on September 14, Haldimand expressed his fears that "so fine a continent [was] threatened to be plunged in all the horrors and calamities of a civil war by the rashness and imprudence of New Englanders who by their conduct [would] prevent, what moderation, equity and temper were much more probable to obtain."⁷

Willing's response, which surprised Haldimand, reflected not only his awareness but his acceptance of the colonial argument. He predicted a long struggle which would benefit neither side: "repeated injuries on the one side, and retorted insults on the other, will probably keep alive the coal, which must consume the vitals of both countries. . . . As an American, I both see and feel the chains which are prepared for me. I honor and glory in the mother country, as I love my own, whose liberties and interest are most cruelly and unjustly attacked—some humiliation on their part, and some concessions on ours, seem to be, the only proper, and probable way, of settling the unhappy dispute." Haldimand had accused the radicals of making petty complaints. Willing rejected the charge: "[the British] are contending for shadows, we for substantial." And he justified his feelings to the General: "you'll excuse a friend, who having his all at stake, speaks in the sincerity of his heart, and wishes well to both countries." His reaction plainly had been triggered by the threat to his economic interests.⁸

⁶ Willing was one of the thirty-four delegates at the convention representing the city or county of Philadelphia. *Pennsylvania Journal*, July 23, 1774; Thayer, *Pennsylvania Politics*, 159; Charles H. Lincoln, *The Revolutionary Movement in Pennsylvania, 1760-1776* (Philadelphia, 1901), 177.

⁷ Haldimand to Willing, Sept. 14, 1774, Manuscript Group 21, Sir Frederick Haldimand Papers, British Museum, transcript, Public Archives, Canada; Jean Newton McIlwraith, *Sir Frederick Haldimand* (Toronto, 1904), 98.

⁸ Willing to Haldimand, Sept. 20, 1774, Haldimand Papers; Thomas Willing Balch, ed., *Willing Letters and Papers with a Biographical Sketch of Thomas Willing of Philadelphia, 1731-1821* (Philadelphia, 1922), 43; Frank Willing Leach, "Old Philadelphia Families—Willing," *North American*, July 21, 1907; see also *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (PMHB), VI (1882), 366.

Although business activities consumed much of Willing's time, particularly after his partner Robert Morris retired from the firm of Willing and Morris, Willing remained involved in the political questions of the period. He served on the twenty-five-member Pennsylvania Committee of Safety, chaired by Benjamin Franklin. This committee had power to call on the Pennsylvania military Association⁹ in case of invasion, and full authority to pay and supply its members with war materials.¹⁰ In addition to defending the state, the committee was authorized to promote the manufacture of saltpetre.¹¹

Willing undoubtedly was selected for this service because of his mercantile house. He could supply Association members more readily than could most committee members. However, his attendance on the Continental Congress from May, 1775, until mid-1776 apparently prevented him from any active committee function. As a result, up to the time he resigned his membership on October 19, his name never appeared in its minutes as being in attendance.¹²

Willing had been passed over as a delegate to Congress in 1774. The seven chosen were all members of the state legislature.¹³ That assembly put James Wilson and Willing in the delegation on May 6, 1775.¹⁴ Willing was reappointed, along with Robert Morris, on November 4, 1775.¹⁵ Though his attendance was sporadic,¹⁶ he did serve on several major committees. One of these, established on May 29, and presided over by Franklin, was to determine the best means of setting up a postal service for the continent. This was a

⁹ Willing was listed among 625 Philadelphia Associators. *Pennsylvania Archives*, 6th Series, I, 470. His name appeared on muster rolls for both the city and county militias of Philadelphia as late as 1786. *Ibid.*, I, 802, and III, 1152, 1179; and *ibid.*, 5th Series, IV, 387.

¹⁰ Thomas Hartley to Willing and J. Wilson, Jan. 29, 1776, Gratz Collection, HSP.

¹¹ *Pennsylvania Colonial Records*, X, 279; Scharf and Westcott, I, 298.

¹² *Colonial Records*, X, 279.

¹³ The seven chosen were Joseph Galloway, Samuel Rhoads, Thomas Mifflin, Charles Humphreys, John Morton, George Ross and Edward Biddle. Thayer, *Pennsylvania Politics*, 159.

¹⁴ Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington, 1905), II, 12, 18, hereinafter cited as *Journals of Congress*; Edmund D. Burnett, ed., *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress* (Washington, 1921), I, 90, hereinafter cited as *Letters of Congress*.

¹⁵ *Journals of Congress*, III, 327.

¹⁶ "Autobiography," 20, Willing Family Correspondence, 1743-1882, Thomas Willing Papers, E. W. Balch Collection, 1699-1923, 5c, HSP.

particularly important assignment since intelligence had to travel quickly to be effective.¹⁷

Although the postal system which emerged from the committee was adopted from New Hampshire to Georgia, the British post continued. In early October, the Congress debated the merits of keeping the parliamentary post. Willing reasoned that since that post had been in operation before 1763 it should not be jeopardized. Richard Henry Lee countered that the ministry was mutilating colonial correspondence in England, and enemies in America were plotting the ruin of the colonies through the post. But Willing, though recognizing the British post as offensive to the colonists, urged the Congress to let it stand: "at present we don't know but there may be a negotiation."¹⁸

The day after Willing was appointed to the postal committee he presented a letter from Lord North to Congress.¹⁹ North referred to his plan of conciliation of February 20, urging its acceptance: "these terms are honorable for Great Britain, and safe for the colonies. . . . If the colonies are not blinded by faction, these terms will remove every grievance relative to taxation, and be the basis of a compact between the colonies and the mother country. . . . The people in America ought on every consideration to be satisfied with them." He warned that the British would yield no more.²⁰

If North accomplished anything, it was to produce a more determined attitude by the Congress to press on. To record its lack of fear, that body ordered the letter to lie on the table.²¹ Because Willing had delivered the message, he increased his reputation as a conciliator at a time when many were turning to more radical views. John Adams, who had complimented him early in September, 1774, criticized him in the summer of 1775. Adams did not like what he saw when he evaluated the new Pennsylvania delegates to Congress: "this province has suffered by the timidity of two overgrown fortunes. The dread of confiscation, or caprice, I know not what has

¹⁷ *Journals of Congress*, II, 71.

¹⁸ Lyman H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), II, 200.

¹⁹ *Journals of Congress*, II, 71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 72; Edmund C. Burnett, *The Continental Congress* (New York, 1941), 94; Konkle, *Willing*, 75.

influenced them too much: yet they were for taking arms and pretended to be very valiant." He was discussing Dickinson and Willing.²²

Despite the views of men like Adams, when Willing returned to the Congress in September, 1775, he sat on several key committees. On September 18, 1775, the Congress created a Secret Committee "to contract for the importation and delivery of any quantity of gunpowder, not exceeding five hundred tons." The committee had the alternative of purchasing saltpetre, with a proportionate amount of sulphur, totaling five hundred tons, if gunpowder could not be obtained. The committee also had authorization to secure "forty brass field pieces, six pounders, for ten thousand stand of arms, and twenty thousand good plain double bridle musket locks."²³ In trade for these military necessities, the committee later gained the power to export to the non-British West Indies such goods as were necessary.²⁴ Willing served only until December 13. Upon his claim that he lived too far from town to enable him to attend the evening meetings without difficulty, the Congress selected Robert Morris to take his place.²⁵ But Willing continued to serve on numerous other committees, generally ones which could use his special abilities as a merchant. One such was a committee set up on September 22, 1775, to analyze the state of American trade and report its finding.²⁶

He was chairman of a committee of five, established on September 21, 1775, which was authorized to determine the best means of supplying the army with provisions.²⁷ Several days later, discussion of the question expanded into a debate which centered on the possible breaking of the continental association. Willing acknowledged that New York had broken the nonimportation agreement: "entirely ninety-nine in one hundred drink tea. I am not for screen-

²² Adams to (?), July 23, 1775, Lyman H. Butterfield, ed., *Adams Family Correspondence* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), I, 253. Adams maintained this image of Willing as the prospects for independence drew nearer. See *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston, 1850), I, 211-212.

²³ *Journals of Congress*, II, 253; *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 339.

²⁴ *Journals of Congress*, II, 238.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 426; "Richard Smith Diary, December 13, 1775," *Letters of Congress*, I, 274; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968), 33.

²⁶ *Journals of Congress*, III, 259.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 257-258.

ing the people of Philadelphia." When debate ended, a committee, with Willing as a member, was empowered to purchase £5,000 sterling worth of goods to be delivered to the Quartermaster who would sell them to the soldiers "at first cost and charges."²⁸ Willing participated in successive discussions concerning both adherence to the association and its nonimportation measures. During one session, he concurred that nonimportation was sufficiently hard upon the farmer, the merchant, and the tradesman, but he refused to indict the "propriety of the measure."²⁹

Debate on ceasing all trade with England grew intense on October 3, 1775. When Richard Henry Lee suggested postponing any decision until delegates from North Carolina arrived, Willing pointed out that North Carolina had promised to place itself "in the same situation with the other colonies," even though the Restraining Acts of March and April, 1775, had not closed hers or Georgia's ports. He repeated Samuel Chase's prediction that all ports would be closed shortly (which did follow the Prohibitory Act in December) and requested a continuance of the discussion: "our gold is locked up at present. We ought to be decisive." He reported that the committee empowered to contract for arms and ammunition faced difficulty: "merchants dared not trade."³⁰

Silas Deane and Lee responded with views favoring some form of trade cessation, but Willing dissented: "shall we act like the dog in the manger, not suffer New York, the lower counties, and North Carolina to export, because we cannot. We may get salt and ammunition by these ports." He denounced Lee's recommendation to use foreign vessels to carry colonial goods, pointing out that "carriage was an amazing revenue," and warned that the circulation of colonial paper money would cease, and lose its credit, without trade. Lee was not convinced. He foresaw the "end of administration" if Willing had his way: "jealousies and dissensions will arise, and dis-

²⁸ John Adams, "Notes of Debates in the Continental Congress, September 23, 1775" (hereinafter cited as "Notes of Debates"), in *Journals of Congress*, III, 471-473; *ibid.*, 260; *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, II, 178, 180; "Samuel Ward Diary, September 23, 1775," *Letters of Congress*, I, 205.

²⁹ "Notes of Debates," *Journals of Congress*, III, 476; *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, II, 186.

³⁰ "Notes of Debates, October 4, 1775," *Journals of Congress*, III, 477; *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, II, 188, 192.

union and division. We shall become a rope of sand." Lee's argument was lost, though, among the trade-oriented opposition.³¹

Willing futilely opposed a petition in mid-March, 1776, to allow privateers to cruise against the English. Exactly why he rejected the notion is not clear. He may have been opposing an escalation of the war. Moreover, he surely wanted to see these vessels carrying cargo, not armament which would probably bring about their confiscation. Early in the war he had come to believe that small craft offered the best cargo ships, because of their fleetness and maneuverability.³²

From mid-March until early July, he was absent from the floor of Congress. Commercial affairs occupied much of his time, but so did provincial politics.³³ A state committee headed by Dickinson recommended on March 8, 1776, that seventeen additional assemblymen be seated. Four new seats were to be filled with representatives from Philadelphia. Voting was close, with Willing failing by eleven votes of gaining a seat. However, three of the four moderates, or anti-independence supporters, did win, together with George Clymer, the sole radical.³⁴

Following this defeat, he remained out of politics until early July. Twenty years later, Thomas McKean recorded: "I well remember, that on Monday, the first day of July, 1776, the Congress in a committee of the whole, voted in favor of independence, all the states concurring except Pennsylvania, which voted in the negative, and Delaware which divided." The Pennsylvania delegates who voted against the measure were Charles Humphreys, Dickinson,

³¹ "Notes of Debates, October 4, 1775," *Journals of Congress*, III, 477-478; *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, II, 190.

³² "Richard Smith Diary, March 13, 1776," *Letters of Congress*, I, 386.

³³ Sitting on the Supreme Court of the state, at a session of oyer and terminer, Apr. 10, 1776, Willing concurred with the opinion of Chief Justice Chew, who defined a treasonable act to the Grand Jury: "an opposition of force of arms to the lawful authority of the King or his ministers is high treason, but in the moment when the King or his ministers shall exceed the constitutional authority vested in them by the constitution, submission to their mandates becomes treason." Konkle, *Willing*, 73.

³⁴ Thayer, *Pennsylvania Politics*, 178. Scharf and Westcott, I, 310, theorized that Clymer won, because "all the Tories would not vote for Willing, who was half a Whig himself, and Robert Morris's partner." But this does not explain the outcome fully. Clymer was popular in the city and garnered one of the top votes. Willing probably lost more because of jealousy among certain city merchants, combined with their dislike of Morris.

Morris and Willing; John Morton, Wilson, and Franklin voted for independence. On the fourth, which McKean recalled as being a rainy day, Dickinson and Morris were absent, and Pennsylvania voted three to two to adopt the Declaration of Independence, with Humphreys and Willing dissenting.³⁵

Why did he oppose independence? Though many reasons have been suggested, Willing himself probably provided the most accurate explanation: "I voted against this declaration in Congress not only because I thought America at that time unequal to such a conflict as must ensue—having neither arms, ammunition, or military experience—but chiefly because the delegates of Pennsylvania were not then authorized by their instructions from the assembly as the voice of the people at large, to join in such a vote."³⁶ Written seven years after the fact, in his autobiography, which was to serve as an example to his children, his analysis might be considered something of an apology.

The question as to whether the delegates were instructed to vote for independence is an involved legal one in which an experienced judicial mind, such as Willing's, could find support for a stand on which he was already committed. By way of background, the Pennsylvania Assembly had instructed its delegates to the Second Continental Congress on November 9, 1775, to "dissent from and utterly reject, any propositions . . . that may cause, or lead to, a separation from our mother country. . . ."³⁷ These instructions stood uncontested until a protest meeting in Philadelphia on May 20, 1776. The protestors favored a complete break with England, and opposed the instructions of the previous November. They further desired to abolish the old Pennsylvania government, and replace it with one which conformed more to the views of Massachusetts and Virginia leaders. A countermeeting held the following day drafted a remonstrance to be sent to the Assembly, rejecting the protest "as setting on foot a measure which tended to disunion and damp-

³⁵ McKean to Alexander James Dallas, Sept. 26, 1796, *Letters of Congress*, I, 533-534; McKean to Caesar Rodney, Sept. 22, 1813, *ibid.*, 534-535; McKean to Adams, January, 1814, *The Works of John Adams*, X (1855), 88.

³⁶ "Autobiography," 20, Willing Family Correspondence.

³⁷ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 8th Series, VIII, 7352-7353; Balch, ed., *Willing Letters and Papers*, xviii.

ened the zeal of multitudes of the good people of Pennsylvania in the common cause."³⁸

On the floor of the Congress two weeks later, Richard Henry Lee introduced his resolution of June 7 calling for independence. The same day, the Committee of Instructions of the Pennsylvania Assembly reported a new set of instructions for its delegates to Congress. On the eighth, the Assembly approved them, thus rescinding those of November, 1775: "the situation of public affairs is . . . so greatly altered that we now think ourselves justifiable in removing the restrictions laid upon you by those instructions."³⁹

But such action was not accepted totally. In the congressional vote on Lee's resolution on June 8, Pennsylvania voted five to two against it, with only Morton and Franklin in favor.⁴⁰ Six days later, without a quorum present in the colonial Assembly, the revised instructions were signed by the speaker. The legitimacy of this revision thus could be challenged by the delegates.⁴¹

Willing decided to follow the old instructions. He may have argued that the Assembly had no more original sovereignty than the Congress to decide the issue of independence, or he may have rejected the new instructions because they had come from a radical element in the Assembly, and because he feared the loss of position he might suffer under new state and central governments. He had endorsed the instructions of the old Assembly because he agreed with them and those who wrote them. He rejected the new ones because he disagreed with them and their authors. Legitimacy proved a convenient constitutional lever.⁴²

But more than just constitutional considerations and military factors swayed his decision. His extensive mercantile interests with England entered into it. Religion, too, played a part. His close

³⁸ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 22, 1776; Balch, ed., *Willing Letters and Papers*, xxxi.

³⁹ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 8th Series, VIII, 7539; June 8, 1776, Pennsylvania: Instructions to the Delegates of This Province in Congress, July 1776, Miscellaneous Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, U.S., Continental Congress (Washington, 1962), microcopy no. 332, reel 8, 0617-0618, Strozier Library, The Florida State University; Balch, ed., *Willing Letters and Papers*, xxxiii.

⁴⁰ Lincoln, *Revolutionary Movement*, 263.

⁴¹ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 8th Series, VIII, 7542-7543; Balch, ed., *Willing Letters and Papers*, xxxiv.

⁴² *Dictionary of American Biography*, XX, 304.

religious and social affiliation with the Anglican Church, and the prospects of severing that connection, further strengthened his opinion. Finally, his long connection with members of the Penn family added immeasurably to his final stand.⁴³ Perhaps the decision within the man was not as complicated as outward appearances made it seem. Prior to the French alliance in 1778, Willing seemed oblivious to the fact of independence; reconciliation remained his chief hope until independence seemed more than a mere declaration. His position caused him discomfort, particularly following the convening on July 15 of a constitutional convention which proceeded to judge the old Pennsylvania government incompetent, and, except for Robert Morris, ousted all congressional delegates who had failed to vote for independence.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, Willing had no desire to flee the state or the country. He remained in Philadelphia, conducting his business and personal affairs even after the city was taken by the British in September, 1777. Just prior to the invasion, the British, recognizing Willing's influence, singled him out to inform the inhabitants that if they remained quietly and peacefully in their homes, they and their property would be safe.⁴⁵

Willing received some public criticism for remaining under English rule, but he suffered no serious financial retribution. He continued to do what he could for Congress.⁴⁶ During the enemy occupation of Philadelphia he was instrumental in alleviating the suffering of

⁴³ *Ibid.*; Balch, ed., *Willing Letters and Papers*, xxxix.

⁴⁴ Willing and Morris to W. Bingham, July 24, 1776, Folder (January-June, 1776), Morris Papers, LC; Willing and Morris to W. Bingham, July 24, 1776, Miscellaneous Collection, Thomas Willing Correspondence, HSP; Robert L. Brunhouse, *The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-1790* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1942), 13. Years later Willing declined an invitation to reactivate his political life: "my inclination and the like action (?) of my family forbids my accepting almost any public employment, and my share of knowledge and abilities are too limited to qualify me for the proper execution . . . as President of the state Council, wherein the interest of others, and my own reputation, are so much at stake. I have heretofore too often felt my own insufficiency in a station of similar nature to wish to have my feelings roused in the same way." Willing to Francis Hopkinson (?), Jan. 13, 1782, Thomas Willing Papers, 1761-1866, Folder (1782).

⁴⁵ "The Diary of Robert Morton," *PMHB*, I (1877), 7.

⁴⁶ John Heyliger requested his aid in introducing Lt. von Hederick to the Congress. Von Hederick hoped to command the four companies of Germans Congress had resolved to raise. Force, ed., *American Archives*, 5th Series, II, 157.

American prisoners.⁴⁷ Steadfastly, he refused to take an oath of loyalty to the Crown and eventually received a dispensation from taking one,⁴⁸ a dispensation which made him all the more suspect with colonial radicals, even though Willing and his family abstained from social life with the British.⁴⁹

His unwillingness to take the oath of the state of Pennsylvania increased suspicions. But there was a yet more obvious reason for radical distrust. The enemy used Willing to communicate peace plans with the Congress. Lord North's letter in 1775 had been delivered by him. And then late in 1777 General William Howe asked his help in proposing a conciliatory plan.⁵⁰

Willing had seen the General on several occasions prior to their principal meeting on the morning of November 2, 1777. Howe had heard, as had Willing, that a recent motion in the Congress to rescind the vote on independence was alleged to have lost by only one vote.⁵¹ The General wondered if "there would be no way found to induce the Congress to rescind their vote of independence, which Great Britain would certainly never submit to." Willing thought it possible if Congress received terms it considered just and honorable, but he conceded that common opinion held Howe as interested only in conquest and confiscation and believed that his commissioners had power merely to grant pardons, and that upon submission. Howe was surprised that the Congress did not think him accommodating: "the consequences of another campaign must be ruin and destruction to the country. . . . I had rather settle the matter in an amicable way, than gain ten victories. . . . Confiscation never entered into our heads." As for his commissioners, Howe claimed that they were empowered to deal with Congress, "if the Congress would agree to rescind the vote of independency." And he promised that England would give the colonies better terms than those accompanying the peace treaty of 1763. Moreover, no standing army

⁴⁷ Leach, "Willing."

⁴⁸ Joseph Galloway, *Reply to the Observations of Sir William Howe* (Philadelphia, 1787), 955; Henry Simpson, "Thomas Willing," *Lives of Eminent Philadelphians Now Deceased* (Philadelphia, 1859), 961.

⁴⁹ Willard O. Mishoff, "Business in Philadelphia, 1777-1778," *PMHB*, LXI (1937), 172.

⁵⁰ C. Paricson (?) to Willing, Oct. 20, 1777, Thomas Willing Papers, Folder (1777); see also the invitation dated Sunday, 9 PM in *ibid.*

⁵¹ See the invitation dated Sunday, 10 PM in *ibid.*

would be kept in America, except such troops as might be needed for Florida and Canada; if Congress would meet his request he offered to withdraw his troops.⁵²

Willing pursued the terms of the plan further. He wanted assurance that the Declaratory Act would be rescinded, but Howe explained that not even the King could tell Parliament what to do. However, the General felt positive that Parliament would "never again renew the dispute about taxation" if the colonies would agree to contribute something to the treasury of the Empire. He surmised that little money would be expected over the next twenty years. Willing also inquired whether the colonies would have to lay down their arms before terms could be negotiated. To this Howe claimed he neither wished nor expected such a demand: "let them keep their arms in their hands . . . until all is settled, and in the meantime, there may be a cessation of hostilities on both sides, as soon as negotiation is agreed to." Lastly, Willing raised a point about the continental currency. He stressed that the "public faith [was] plighted for its redemption," and that unless it were to be honored thousands of people would be ruined. Howe passed over these observations lightly: "they shall have any terms, which in reason and justice they can ask."⁵³

Willing was pleased with the plan, though he regretted that the terms had not been offered eighteen months earlier. While both men rejected any notion of presenting the plan directly to the Congress, he agreed with the General's suggestion that the terms be relayed to one of its members. Willing named Morris as the recipient, and proposed that a friend of theirs, John Brown, a Philadelphia merchant, be given the task of delivering the proposals.⁵⁴ Once Morris had them, he would be expected to pass them on to others, if he saw merit in them. Willing and Howe swore to keep their talks secret, though Howe confessed he desired to inform his brother, whom he stated had identical sentiments about reconciling differences. Brown was under the "strictest injunctions, not to mention

⁵² Willing to Francis Lightfoot, nd., *ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Willing had used Brown before to take messages to Morris in Manheim. Willing to Morris, Oct. 13, 1777, Willing Family Correspondence, Balch Collection, 6.

the business to any person, but Morris, or . . . others . . . he directed him to mention it to."⁵⁵

Brown, whom Willing called on that afternoon, agreed to transact the business. Willing saw him again the next day about his mission,⁵⁶ and that same day Brown received a pass from Thomas Wharton, President of Pennsylvania. Willing believed the pass sufficient to get Brown through any part of the state, "while he behaved himself inoffensively."⁵⁷

The following morning, prior to Brown's departure, Willing described for him the details of his meeting with the General the evening before when Willing had again raised the currency question. Although Howe offered no positive assurances on that issue, Willing was optimistic, nonetheless, and instructed Brown to inform Morris:

if all other things are adjusted, and a negotiation can be now set on foot, I have no doubt from all that has passed, and the present disposition of the commissioners, that even our paper currency will be established. . . . This is the proper time . . . for America to make her bargain. . . . She has had some success, let her not miss the favorable moment; the wheel of fortune may take another turn, and we may never have it in our power to tread on so respectable a footing again.

Willing also told Brown to advise Morris that if he felt Willing's presence, rather than Brown's, would give the proposals more weight, he would meet with interested congressmen. Willing reminded Brown to assure Morris that Congress did not have to rescind independence until all other points were agreed to in private.⁵⁸

Congressman Francis Lightfoot Lee, who was made aware of the proposals once Brown had delivered them to Morris, was skeptical, but admitted that if the Howes had any real power to make such promises he believed negotiations could be opened: "I think it for

⁵⁵ Willing to Lee, Thomas Willing Papers.

⁵⁶ Willing wrote Morris to expect Brown: "I hope to God Mr. Brown will not be interrupted. . . . This is important business to us." Willing to Morris, Nov. 3, 1777, Willing Family Correspondence, Balch Collection, 7.

⁵⁷ Willing to Lee, Thomas Willing Papers.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the advantage partially of America." Willing sent him a lengthy description of his meeting with General Howe, assuring Lee of Howe's sincerity and of the authority of the commissioners to act.⁵⁹

But Lee was not enough support. When Henry Laurens reported the proposals to Washington,⁶⁰ the American General condemned the whole idea: "it has been the unvaried custom of the enemy, from the commencement of the present contest, to try every artifice and device to delude the people. The message sent through John Brown was calculated for this end. I am surprised Thomas Willing should suffer himself to be imposed on by such flimsy measures. He knows that there is a plain, obvious way for General and Lord Howe to communicate . . . to Congress, without the intervention of a second or third hand. But this would not suit their views."⁶¹ Willing, who continued to see Howe, temporarily fell out of favor in Congress, and Brown suffered imprisonment.⁶²

Thus the Philadelphian had experienced another political disappointment, but he was not a political realist. He was a businessman, and he followed those roads which seemed best for business. At times this put him in the forefront of the rebellion, as in mid-1774; at other times, it pushed him to the back when he refused to concur with those around him on severing ties with England. Such a separation had appeared to him to be too extreme a move, one which could damage seriously not only colonial rights but commerce.

In 1778 the realities around him, particularly the rejection of the Howe plan and the Franco-American defensive and commercial alliances, persuaded him to declare his loyalty to Pennsylvania, but,

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Laurens to Washington, Nov. 19, 1777, *Letters of Congress*, II, 559.

⁶¹ Washington to the President of the Continental Congress, Nov. 23, 1777, *Pennsylvania Archives*, 1st Series, VI, 30.

⁶² See the invitation of Howe to Willing dated Jan. 13, 1778, Thomas Willing Papers, Folder (1778); "Diary of Robert Morton," *PMHB*, I (1877), 35. Brown's final statements before the council that examined him on Nov. 24, 1777, probably did not help his case. He repeated General Howe's warning to Willing that "Great Britain would never give way to the independence of North America; that more men would be out in the spring and . . . would harass American trade so that the colonies could not go on." As with previous plans offered by England, the accompanying threat generally damaged the intention. Nov. 24, 1777, Minute Book and Minutes, Records of the Second Council of Safety, 1777, Records of the Supreme Executive Council, Pennsylvania Archives, William Penn Museum; and Nov. 21-24, 1777, *Colonial Records*, XI, 344-347.

even then, only as the British were abandoning Philadelphia.⁶³ The writing was on the wall; his security was in jeopardy the longer he tried to maintain neutrality. As the war progressed, the taint on his earlier image was removed by the mercantile and financial support he provided in the struggle for independence.⁶⁴ The firm of Willing and Morris, under his guidance after 1778, continued to aid the cause of the Revolution.

By 1780, he had totally accepted the new political state and was working to strengthen it. He combined with others in the 1780s to try to save the national credit, which in turn secured his own, and was awarded in 1781 with the presidency of the Bank of North America, a private institution which helped stabilize national finances. Later Alexander Hamilton would name him the first president of the Bank of the United States. Reluctantly having become a revolutionary, he was thereafter a chief supporter of the Federalist cause.

Money and security are not the only causes for joining a revolution. But for Willing, as for other moderates whose dreams and ambitions had brought them to America, safety and business considerations overrode ideological motives. There seems little doubt that their involvement in nation-building, whatever their motivations, proved indispensable and essential. We would do well to remember the material concerns of such individuals as we seek to clarify the Revolutionary spirit for our own generation.

*The Pennsylvania State University,
Allentown Campus*

EUGENE R. SLASKI

⁶³ Willing signed the oath of allegiance to Pennsylvania on May 22, 1778, HSP. Those in business who did not comply by June 1 would not be permitted to carry on their trade. Thomas Willing Papers, Folder (1778).

⁶⁴ Elias Boudinot to Willing, July 30, 1783, Boudinot Papers, HSP.