

HOW MASSACHUSETTS RECEIVED THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

BY JOHN HENRY EDMONDS

AN ACCOUNT of the Commerce of the English Colonies of America, edited by Edmund Halley, F. R. S., in 1728, says:

I cannot close this summary Account of the English Trade, and especially its Circulation among themselves in America, without some Remarks, which I would have been larger upon, if I had had room.

By this absolute Dependance of the English Colonies in America upon one another for the carrying on their Trade, it appears how groundless those Notions are which some People have entertain'd, concerning the Danger of the Colonies of New England breaking off from the English Yoke, and setting up for an Independency of Government, and a Freedom of Commerce.

Were it possible that any other Nation, or all the Nations of the Earth, could first supply them with the Manufactures of Europe as cheap as the English can, and could then take off or consume the Growth of their Country as the English do, on which last especially their Prosperity depends, there might be some room for the Suggestion.

But as it is surely never any Notion of this kind was so groundless. It is allow'd a proper and just way of expressing our selves in Trade, to say, that Merchants cannot do a thing which they cannot do to their Advantage; and that such a thing is impossible to be done in Trade, which is impossible to be done without ruin to the Trade we are speaking of.

Upon this foot I must insist, it is impossible that the People of New England, be they as opulent and powerful as can be suggested, can ever break off from their Subjection to and Dependance upon the British Government, without the Consent of Great Britain; because it is impossible they can ever do so without the Destruction of their Commerce, and consequently without the Ruin of the Colony.

I have added the Words, without the Consent of Great Britain, not that Great Britain can be supposed ever to give their Consent to such a Separation, but for the Reason following.

As we are sure then, and may take it for granted without begging the Question, that Great Britain will never consent to such a Separation or Independency; we may likewise say, it will naturally follow, that upon any such Attempt the Government of Great Britain would immediately forbid all Commerce between them and our Island Colonies: Nay, it is done in the very Nature of the thing; for if New England were set up for an Independency, and so (as necessarily would follow) were broken off from the English Government, the Trade between them and the Islands would be *ipso facto* prohibited by the Act of Navigation, and every Ship coming to any of our Island Colonies would be confiscated, with all its Cargo.¹

Then follows a discussion as to what New England would do in the matter of trade, which is summed up as follows:

Without their Conjunction with, and Subjection to England, they could not have a Market for their Produce, and could not consume their Provisions.

Without a Market for their Produce, they could not raise a Return to pay the Ballance of their Trade to Europe.

Without paying that Ballance, they could not be supply'd with European Goods.

Without a Supply of European Goods, their Trade could not be supported.

And if their Trade is not supported, their Colony would be undone.

From all which the Inference is natural, That it is a ridiculous and groundless Suggestion, that there is any danger of New England's casting off the British Yoke, as they would call it; and it is impossible the Colony can set up an Independency, or break off from its Subjection to Britain, because it cannot do so without being ruin'd and undone.

Another useful Observation, which ought to be made here, and which, according to my Method in the Trade of all other Parts of the World, I should at large have entred upon, is an Account of what glorious Improvements in Trade these Colonies on the Continent of America are capable of, with the concurring Assistance of Great Britain; which would not only increase and enlarge the Colonies to a degree infinitely beyond

¹Halley, "Atlas Maritimus et Commercialis." . . . London, 1728, p. 330.

what they now are, and add thousands of Families to their People, and thousands of Ships to their Navigation, but would yet farther contribute, if that were possible, to bind them down to their Dependance upon Great Britain.²

On January 15, 1776, Samuel Adams, in Philadelphia, wrote to John Adams, in Massachusetts:

A motion was made in Congress the other day, to the following purpose; That whereas we had been charged with aiming at independency, a committee should be appointed to explain to the people at large, the principles and grounds of our opposition, &c. The motion alarmed me. I thought Congress had already been explicit enough, and was apprehensive that we might get ourselves upon dangerous ground. Some of us prevailed so far as to have the matter postponed, but could not prevent the assigning a day to consider it. I may perhaps have been wrong in opposing this motion; and I ought the rather to suspect it, because the majority of your [our] colony, as well as of the Congress, were of a different opinion.

I had lately some free conversation with an eminent gentleman, whom you well know, and whom your Portia in one of her letters admired, [Franklin] if I recollect right, for his *expressive silence*, about a confederation; a matter which our much valued friend Colonel W[ythe], is very solicitous to have completed. We agreed that it must soon be brought on, and that if all the colonies could not come into it, it had better be done by those of them that inclined to it. I told him that I would endeavor to unite the New England colonies in confederating it, if *none* of the rest would join in it. He approved of it, and said, if I succeeded, he would cast in his lot among us.³

On January 25, in Continental Congress, John Dickinson, James Wilson, William Hooper, James Duane and Robert Alexander were appointed to prepare an address to the inhabitants of the United Colonies⁴ and on February 13 they brought in a draft, which was laid on the table,⁵ in which they disavow "carrying on the War 'for the Purpose of establishing an independent Empire' " and "declare, that what we aim at, and what we are entrusted by you to pursue, is

²Halley, "Atlas Maritimus et Commercialis." . . . London, 1728, p. 330.

³Ford, "Journals of Continental Congress," vol 4, p. 57 hereafter referred to as "Journals."

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 134-146.

the Defence and Re-establishment of the constitutional Rights of the Colonies."⁶

On May 9, the Massachusetts House of Representatives (then sitting at the Meeting House in Watertown) "On Motion, *Ordered*, That Mr. Speaker [James Warren], Major [Joseph] *Hawley*, and Mr. [William] *Story*, be a Committee to bring in a Resolve recommending the several Towns in the Colony to give Instructions to their Representatives, with respect to INDEPENDENCE."⁷

On that afternoon,

The Committee appointed to bring in a Resolve, recommending the Towns to instruct their Representatives with Respect to Independency, reported.

Read and accepted.

Resolved, That it be, and hereby is recommended to each Town in this Colony, who shall send a Member or Members to the next General Assembly, fully to possess him or them with their Sentiments relative to a Declaration of Independency of the United Colonies on Great-Britain, to be made by Congress, and to instruct them what Conduct they would have them observe with Regard to the next General Assembly's instructing the Delegates of this Colony on that Subject.

Sent up for Concurrence.

Ordered, That Capt. [Jonathan] Brown get the foregoing Resolve printed in Hand Bills, and sent to the several Towns in this Colony.⁸

On May 10,

On a Motion, *Ordered*, That a Message go [to] the honorable Board to know if they have passed on the Resolve of Yesterday, relating to requesting the Inhabitants of the several Towns to instruct their Members to be chosen relating to Independency.

Samuel Holten, Esq; came down and informed the House that the Board had non-concurred the same;

Thereupon *Ordered*, That the Secretary be directed to lay the said Resolve on the Table, which he did accordingly.⁹

A little later on in the day (which was the last of the session) the House found a way to overcome the non-concurrence of the Council and

⁶"Journals," vol. 4, p. 141

⁷"Journal of the House of Representatives," 1775/6, p. 266, hereafter referred to as "Journal."

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 274.

Resolved, As the Opinion of this House that the Inhabitants of each Town, in this Colony, ought in full Meeting warned for that Purpose, to advise the Person or Persons who shall be chosen to Represent them in the next General Court, whether that if the honorable Congress should, for the Safety of the said Colonies, declare them Independent of the Kingdom of Great-Britain, they the said Inhabitants will solemnly engage with their Lives and Fortunes to Support the Congress in the Measure.

Ordered, That Mr. [William] Cooper get the foregoing Resolve printed in the several News-Papers as soon as possible.¹⁰

and it was printed in the Boston Gazette, New England Chronicle, etc.

There are no letters to the General Court in the Massachusetts Archives suggesting the action of May 9, nor is there any mention of such in either the House Journal or the Council Records (Legislative or Executive). The following letter of May 13, written to Samuel Adams by Dr. Samuel Cooper, may explain it:

I am much oblig'd to you for your Favor 30th Apr. which I receiv'd by the Post the Evening before last, and am glad to find Affairs are in so good a Train in the Southern Colonies; In N. England the Voice is almost universal for Independance . . . Our General Court is dissolved—Before this took place, the House pass'd a Vote to consult their Constituents, whether they would instruct their future Representatives to move the Continental Congress for Independance—I can only assure you of the Substance of the Vote; the Form of it was not clearly related to me. The House sent up this Vote to the Council for their Concurrence—The Propriety of this was doubted by some, who did not think the Council could properly act on such an affair. It was however done, and the Council negativ'd the Vote. Mr Cushing among others was against it. He said that it would embarass the Congress—that we ought to wait till they mov'd the Question to us—that it would prejudice the other Colonies against us—and that you had wrote to some Body here, that things with you were going on slowly and surely, and any Kind of Eagerness in us upon this Question would do Hurt. Others said that the Congress might not choose to move such a Point to their Constituents tho they might be very glad to know their minds upon it—that it was beginning at the right End for the Constituents to instruct their Delegates at Congress, & not wait for their asking Instructions

¹⁰"Journal," 1775/6, p. 276.

from their Constituents—that the Question had been long thought of & agitated thro the Colonies, & it was now high Time to come to some Determination upon it; otherwise our artful Enemies might sew the Seeds of Dissention among us to the great Prejudice if not Ruin of the common Cause. The House, tho they would have been glad of the Concurrence of the Council in this Matter, have determin'd to proceed without them; and Instructions will go from all Parts on this Head; and it seems, by Appearances thro the Continent, you will not be able to defer a great While your Decision on this grand Question.—¹¹

The General Court, as above mentioned, was dissolved by the Council without any further action and did not reassemble until May 29 at the Meeting House in Watertown.

On June 6,

Inquiry was made of the Members from the several towns, whether they had instructions from their respective towns, with regard to independency. Many of whom informed the House, that their towns were unanimous for the measure. Other towns had not instructed their Representatives.

Ordered, That Col. [John] Cumings, Mr. [Aaron] Wood, and Mr. [Joseph] Dorr, bring in a resolve to notify such towns to forward their sentiments on this subject, without delay.¹²

On June 7,

The Committee appointed to bring in a resolve, recommending to those towns which have not yet instructed their Representatives with regard to independency, to forward their sentiments on that subject, without delay, reported.

Read and accepted.

Whereas by a resolve of the late House, the 10th of May, 1776, it was resolved, That the inhabitants of each town in this colony ought, in full meeting warned for that purpose, to advise the person or persons who should be chosen to represent them in the next General Court, whether, should the Honorable Congress, for the safety of the said Colonies, declare them independent of the kingdom of Great-Britain, they, the said inhabitants, will solemnly engage, with their lives and fortunes, to support them in the measure. And though said resolve was published in the public news-papers, yet it has since been manifest to the present House, that some towns in the said colony, were not so seasonably favored with the said prints, as to have it in their power to instruct their Representatives,

¹¹Hazelton, "The Declaration of Independence," pp. 50-52.

¹²"Journal," 1776/7, edition of 1777, p. 19.

agreeable to advice in said resolve (had they been so minded) so that the present General Assembly are unable to collect the sentiments of many towns in the said colony, on so interesting and important a subject. And as some towns, who had reasonable notice, have given their Representatives instructions to comply fully with the resolve aforesaid, whose numbers, to the honor of their constituents, are very numerous; and as some of the United Colonies have of late bravely refused to subject themselves to the tyrannical yoke of Great-Britain any longer, by declaring for independence.

Therefore, *Resolved*, As the opinion of this House, that such towns as have not complied with the resolve aforesaid, whether they are represented or not, duly warn a town-meeting for such purpose, as soon as may be, that their sentiments may be fully known to this House, agreeable to the former resolve of the late House of Representatives; and that one hundred and fifty hand-bills be forthwith printed and sent to such towns for the purpose aforesaid.¹³

A copy of this broadside (Ford, No. 1988) is at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

On June 14,

Benjamin Austin, Esq.; brought down a letter from the Hon. Edmund Pendleton, Esq; President of the General Convention of the colony of Virginia, inclosing the resolutions of that Convention, with respect to independency [which reads as follows]. Read, and order to lie.¹⁴

Virginia May 22^d 1776.

Sir:

I am honored with the Commands of the General Convention of this Colony to transmit you the Inclosed Resolutions, which they have thought it indispensably necessary to enter into at this important Crisis; requesting you will communicate their Contents to the Convention of your Country for their consideration. I have the Hon^r. to be

Sir

Your mo^t Obed^t Servant

Edm Pendleton

President

Honble the Pres^t of the Convention
of the Massachusetts Bay.

In Council June 14th 1776

Read & sent down

John Lowell Dp^y Sec^y P T¹⁵

¹³"Journal," 1776/7, edition of 1777, p. 21.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁵Mass. Archives, vol. 195, p. 9.

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