



Loyalists at the Outbreak of the Revolution, 1775-1776

In the mid 1770s, especially after the Battle of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, any toleration for Loyalists vanished. Patriot committees of safety required citizens to pledge support for the cause of American independence or be deemed “inimical to the liberties of America.” Violence toward Loyalists increased, leading many to leave the country for Canada, Britain, or the West Indies. Presented here are selections by and about Loyalists that represent the tumultuous political atmosphere at the outbreak of the American Revolution, and the personal decisions required by Americans loyal to Britain and/or unwilling to abandon the goal of reconciliation and fight a war for independence.

1775 “all the Horrors of a Civil War”

In an address to the New Jersey assembly, Gov. William Franklin, the son of Benjamin Franklin and a Loyalist, warns of the dangers of choosing independence.

GENTLEMEN OF THE COUNCIL, AND GENTLEMEN OF THE ASSEMBLY, . . .

You have now pointed out to you, Gentlemen, two Roads — one evidently leading to Peace, Happiness and a Restoration of the public Tranquility — the other inevitably conducting you to Anarchy, Misery, and all the Horrors of a Civil War. Your Wisdom, your Prudence, and your Regard for the true Interests of the People, will be best known when you have shown to which Road you give the Preference. If to the former, you will probably afford Satisfaction to the moderate, the sober, and the discreet Part of your Constituents. If to the latter, you will, perhaps for a Time, give Pleasure to the warm, the rash, and the inconsiderate among them, who, I would willingly hope, violent as is the Temper of the present Times, are not even now the Majority. But it may be well for you to remember, should any Calamity hereafter befall them from your Compliance with their Inclinations, instead of pursuing, as you ought, the Dictates of your own Judgment, that the Consequences of their [not] returning to a proper Sense of their Conduct, may prove deservedly fatal to yourselves.

I shall say no more at present on this disagreeable Subject, but only to repeat an Observation I made to a former Assembly, on a similar Occasion:¹ “Every breach of the [English] Constitution, whether it proceeds from the Crown or the People, is, in its Effects, equally destructive to the Rights of both.” It is the Duty, therefore, of those who are entrusted with Government to be equally careful in guarding against Encroachments from the one as the other. But *It is* (says one of the wisest of Men), *a most infallible Symptom of the dangerous State of Liberty, when the chief Men of a free Country show a greater Regard to Popularity than to their own Judgment.*²

___ Gov. William Franklin, Address to the New Jersey Provincial Assembly, 13 January 1775, excerpt.³

¹ Franklin is quoting from his address to the assembly in November 1765 during the Stamp Act Crisis [Gerlach, *New Jersey in the American Revolution*, p. 111; see footnote 3 below].

² “The Speech of C. Plinius Caecilius,” [pseudonym] in “Proceedings of the Political Club, August 1742,” *The Scots Magazine*, Vol. IV, Edinburgh, 1742.

³ Larry R. Gerlach, ed., *New Jersey in the American Revolution, 1763-1783: A Documentary History* (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1975), pp. 110-111; also in *Minutes of the Provincial Congress and the Council of Safety of State of New Jersey* (Trenton, NJ, 1879), pp. 65-67.

1775 “my good honest neighbors disapprove”

A “Jersey Farmer” offers a proposal to be signed by colonists who resist the pressure to support independence.

I am a plain countryman, and know that many of my good honest neighbors disapprove of most of the late [recent] measures and proceedings of the [Continental] Congress, as well as myself; and some of them have expressed a desire that some person would draw up a paper declarative of their sentiments, they would sign it as the only method now left them of disavowing their ever having countenanced or concurred in the late measures. I take the liberty, through the channel of your *useful paper*, to convey the following (to them, and others in like circumstances) which they may adopt or modify to their liking. I am,

Your most humble servant, A JERSEY FARMER

[followed by “Proposal for an Association; Humbly offered to all Lovers of good order and government in America,” in which signers disavow any anti-British actions of the colony and the Continental Congress and affirm allegiance to the king]

—“A Jersey Farmer,” *Rivington’s New York Gazetteer*, 26 January 1775.⁴

1775 “Before I leave America”

Censured and harassed by New York Patriots, a Loyalist declares his sentiments before leaving his native country for Nova Scotia.

MY COUNTRYMEN,

BEFORE I leave America, the land I love, and in which is contained everything that is valuable and dear to me, my wife, my children, my friends and property; permit me to make a short and faithful declaration, which I am induced to do neither through fear nor a consciousness of having acted wrong. An honest man and a Christian hath nothing to apprehend [fear] from this world. God is my judge, and God is my witness, that all I have done, written or said in relation to the present unnatural dispute between Great Britain and her Colonies proceeded from an honest intention of serving my country. Her welfare and prosperity were the objects towards which all my endeavors have been directed. They still are the sacred objects which I shall ever steadily and invariably keep in view. And when in England, all the influence

that so inconsiderable a man as I am can have, shall be exerted in her behalf.

It has been my constant maxim through life to do my duty conscientiously, and to trust the issue of my actions to the Almighty. May that God, in whose hands are all events,

speedily restore peace and liberty to my unhappy country. May Great Britain and America be soon united in the bands of everlasting amity; and when united, may they continue a free, a virtuous, and happy nation to the end of time.

I leave America, and every endearing connection, because I will not raise my hand against my Sovereign — nor will I draw my sword against my Country. When I can conscientiously draw it in her favor, my life shall be cheerfully devoted to her service.

—Isaac Wilkins, *Rivington’s New York Gazetteer*, 11 May 1775.⁵

⁴ America’s Historical Newspapers, American Antiquarian Society with Readex/NewsBank; reprinted in Gerlach, ed., *New Jersey in the American Revolution*, pp. 114–115.

⁵ America’s Historical Newspapers. For the broadside calling for Wilkins’s arrest a week earlier, see THEME II: REBELLION #2, in this primary resource collection.

1775 “not Enemies to their Country”

As did many colonies, the South Carolina Provincial Congress required citizens to sign “the Association,” a pledge to support independence,⁶ and deemed as enemies those who refused to sign. Henry Laurens, president of the Congress, urged tolerance toward Loyalists and others who in good conscience refused to sign.

GENTLEMEN,

After I have explained myself upon two parts of this Association⁶ I shall obey your Order & sign it with alacrity. . . [A]lthough I hold myself bound by the Majority of Voices for signing it in its present state, I cannot agree with some Gentlemen who have declared their dissent to the insertion of certain words expressive of our “Duty & Loyalty” to the King, nor with those who according to the bare Letter of this Association would persuade us that we ought to hold indiscriminately every Man who shall refuse to sign it Inimical to the liberty of the Colonies. I have not premeditated a Speech for this occasion, I have thought much of the subject— my words will flow from the Heart— I am not anxious to influence any Man — I have concerted measures with no Man— what I have to offer will afford no subject for debate, I therefore hope for & humbly claim a patient hearing & a candid interpretation of my sentiments. . . .

The second part of this Association on which I desire to explain myself before I subscribe [sign] is the late *subjoined* [recently added] declaration that “*we will hold all those Persons Inimical to the Liberty of the Colonies who shall refuse to subscribe,*” this is a Doctrine, Gentlemen, which was also, as I well remember, very much disrelished by many of our Members — to me in its fullest extent & according to an opinion just now delivered by a Gentleman behind the Chair it is abhorrent & detestable.

. . . I say, Gentlemen, there are certain Men who are not Enemies to their Country — who are friends to all America — who were born among us — some who have lived to a longer a date than that by which the Royal Psalmist limits the Life of Man— they are upwards of threescore Years & ten — whose whole Lives have been spent in Acts of benignity & public service, Acts which prove beyond all Controversy their Love for their Country — such Men there are who when you present this Paper to them will tell you they are true friends to America — they acknowledge that we are greatly aggrieved & oppressed — they wish well to our Cause — are willing to give up their fortunes as security for their good behavior & in testimony of their sincerity — but that they cannot, they dare not, for many reasons subscribe to the Association — I do not recollect one tis true — but there may be among us some Quakers or Men of Quaker principles on the Lawfulness of going to War & especially Civil War, Men who confide in the goodness of our Cause & the overruling Providence of God — such Men may refuse to subscribe this Covenant & yet give you the most indubitable proofs of their friendship & good will towards the Colonies.

Other Men there are, who are not less friendly to America than we ourselves — but who think we have precipitated a Measure which ought to have been delayed at least until we had received some advices from our Continental Congress, from our own Delegates, in whom we have lodged our whole Power & solemnly engaged to be bound by their determinations — of this Class of refusers, there may be some who are such staunch, such vigorous, friends, as will without hesitation declare they are willing to Bleed & Die in defense of the just Rights of the Colonies when the proper times arrives, but that we are premature —we are too hasty — Can I then, Gentlemen, implicitly sign a Paper — anathematize good Men — & declare those to be Enemies whom I believe & know to be our friends? I cannot be such a Fool — I dare not be such a Villain. . . .

And Now, under these necessary explanations of my Duty & Loyalty to my King & Charity for my Neighbors, I will cheerfully subscribe this Association with my hand & upon proper occasion be ready to seal it with my Blood.

___ Henry Laurens, President, Address to the South Carolina Provincial Congress, 4 June 1775, excerpts.⁷

⁶ “To unite ourselves under every tie of religion and of honor, and associate as a band in her [America’s] defense against every god, and we solemnly promise that whenever her Continental or Provincial Councils shall decree it necessary we will go forth and be ready to sacrifice our lives and fortunes in attempting to secure her *Freedom and Safety*.” The association was adopted with the requirement to “hold all those persons inimical to the liberty of the colonies who shall refuse to subscribe . . .” David Duncan Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens* (New York: Putnam’s, 1915), p. 206, citing *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, Vol. 10, p. 100; Vol. 8, pp. 141-142.

⁷ Transactions of the South Carolina Provincial Congress, in “Miscellaneous Papers of the General Committee, Secret Committee, and Provincial Congress” (Henry Laurens Papers), *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, South Carolina Historical Society, 8:1 (Jan. 1907), pp. 142-144.

1775 “such a Horrid Spectacle”

The tarring and feathering of a Georgia Loyalist is described to a British official by James Wright, the last royal governor of Georgia.

... My Lord, on the 24th instant [of this month] about 9 o'clock at Night I heard a very great Huzzaing in the Streets, and on Sending out⁸ found they had seized upon one Hopkins, a Pilot, and were Tarring and Feathering⁹ him, and Soon after they brought him in a Cart along by my House and such a Horrid Spectacle I really never Saw. They made the Man Stand up in a Cart with a Candle in his Hand and a great many Candles were Carried round the Cart and thus they went through most of the Streets in town for upwards of three Hours.

And on Inquiring what he had done, I was Informed that he had behaved disrespectfully towards the Sons of Liberty and Drank some Toasts which gave great offense, but for Your Lordship's more Particular Information in both these Matters I enclose a Copy of the Affidavits of the Parties and the Newspaper, and I must at the same time observe that I cannot believe this Conduct is Promoted or Approved of by the People in General, but only by some very Violent ones amongst them and the Mob. Your Lordship will be the best Judge what is most Proper to be done, but I beg leave again most heartily to wish that Conciliatory Measures may Speedily take place or total Ruin and Destruction will soon follow, and America Lost and Gone.

___Sir James Wright, governor of Georgia, letter to Lord Dartmouth, 29 July 1775, excerpt.¹⁰

1776 “raged with . . . unbridled Fury”

An Anglican minister in Connecticut describes Patriot attacks on Loyalists, especially Anglican clergy, that led him to flee to New York.

[After September 1774], that violent Spirit in the Whigs [Patriots] of harassing and oppressing the loyal Tories [Loyalists], which then prevailed most in the Eastern parts of Connecticut, spread itself by Degrees into the Western Parts, where during the last Summer and Autumn it raged with as much, and I believe more, unbridled Fury that ever it had done at the Eastward. And I have been obliged a little more than a Month since to leave my Parishes, my Family and Friends, and to fly into Exile in order to escape Violence and Imprisonment, if not immediate Death, . . .

The same People in our Colony which at the Beginning of the present Disputes were loyal and averse to take up Arms against the King do generally, and I believe I may say universally, retain their Loyalty and Duty still. Those Methods which the other party hath made Use of to gain them over to their Side, such as Minute men and Mobs, dragging them before ignorant, dirty, domineering Committees of Inspection, imprisoning some and tarring and feathering others, and the like, have had no Effect than to confirm them the more as well in their attachment to the British Government as in the Abhorrence of the Tyranny of their new-made Masters.

Professors of the Church of England [i.e., Anglican clergymen] have sustained the chief Load of Insult and Abuse, it being known that they are firmly loyal; and no Pains have been spared to vilify and degrade the Clergy for no other Crime but merely that of inculcating upon their hearers the Duties of Peaceableness and quiet Subjection to the Parent State. . . .

... I am too far advanced in Years [Mansfield was 52] and in too poor a State of Health to think of coming over to England where I suppose there are as many Clergymen already as can ever be provided for. I determine therefore to continue under the Protection of the King's Troops either at New York or Boston till such Time as this horrid and unnatural War shall be concluded.

___Rev. Richard Mansfield, letter to Rev. Samuel Peters, 12 January 1776, excerpts.¹¹

⁸ i.e., on sending someone to determine what was happening.

⁹ Tarring and feathering was a common form of intimidation and revenge in colonial America, used against royal officials and offending citizens, and, in the prerevolutionary period, used to threaten Loyalists or others who did not fully support the Patriot cause. The crowd would strip the victim, pour hot tar over his/her body, and then roll the person in feathers that would adhere to the tar. Usually the person was paraded about the area on a cart before being released and perhaps threatened with further violence. Occasionally the victim would die.

¹⁰ *Collections of the Georgia Historical Society*, Vol. 3 (1873), pp. 200-203. Acknowledgment is due Cray, *The Price of Loyalty*, for identifying the text.

1776 “the thing I greatly feared came upon me”

In his memoir written in Canada, Walter Bates describes his ordeals as the sixteen-year-old son of a Connecticut Loyalist family in 1776.

At length the thing I greatly feared came upon me. A small boat was discovered by the American guard in one of these coves, by night, in which they suspected that one of my brothers with some others had come from the British. They supposed them concealed in the neighborhood and that I must be acquainted with it.

At this time I had just entered my sixteenth year. I was taken and confined in the Guard House; next day examined before a Committee [of Safety] and threatened with sundry deaths¹² if I did not confess what I knew not of. They threatened among other things to confine me at low water and let the tide drown me if I did not expose these honest farmers. At length I was sent back to the Guard House until ten o'clock at night, when I was taken out by an armed mob, conveyed through the field gate one mile from the town to back creek, then having been stripped my body was exposed to the mosquitoes, my hands and feet being confined to a tree near the Salt Marsh, in which situation for two hours time every drop of blood would be drawn from my body; when soon after two of the committee said that if I would tell them all I knew, they would release me, if not they would leave me to these men who, perhaps, would kill me.

I told them that I knew nothing that would save my life.

They left me, and the Guard came to me and said they were ordered to give me, if I did not confess, one hundred stripes [of the whip], and if that did not kill me I would be sentenced to be hanged. Twenty stripes was then executed with severity, after which they sent me again to the Guard House. No “Tory” was allowed to speak to me, but I was insulted and abused by all.

The next day the committee proposed many means to extort a confession from me, the most terrifying was that of confining me to a log on the carriage in the Saw mill and let the saw cut me in two if I did not expose “those Torys.” Finally they sentenced me to appear before Col. Davenport, in order that he should send me to head quarters, where all the Tories he sent were surely hanged. Accordingly next day I was brought before Davenport — one of the descendants of the old apostate Davenport, who fled from old England — who, after he had examined me, said with great severity of countenance, “I think you could have exposed those Tories.”

I said to him, “You might rather think I would have exposed my own father sooner than suffer what I have suffered.” Upon which the old judge could not help acknowledging he never knew any one who had withstood more without exposing confederates [friends/allies], and he finally discharged me the third day. It was a grievous misfortune to be in such a situation, but the fear of God animated me not to fear man. My resolution compelled mine enemies to show their pity that I had been so causelessly afflicted, and my life was spared. I was, however, obliged to seek refuge from the malice of my persecutors in the mountains and forests until their frenzy might be somewhat abated.

____Walter Bates, Narrative, written ca. 1830s?, excerpts.¹³

1776 “misery, insults, and sickness enough”

Also an Anglican Loyalist in Connecticut, Peters describes his imprisonment and mistreatment by Patriots before he fled to Canada.

Rev. Dr. Wheelock, President of Dartmouth College in New Hampshire . . . with Deacon Bayley, Mr. Morey, and Mr. Hurd, all justices of the peace, put an end to the Church of England in this State so early as 1775.¹⁴ They seized me, Capt. Peters, and all the judges of Cumberland and Gloucester, the Rev. Mr. Cossitt and Mr. Cole, and all the Church people for 200 miles up the river (Connecticut), and confined us

¹¹ Catherine S. Crary, ed., *The Price of Loyalty: Tory Writings from the Revolutionary Era* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), pp. 103-106, citing the Peters Papers, Church Historical Society, Austin, Texas; permission request submitted.

¹² I.e., various manners of dying.

¹³ *Kingston and the Loyalists of the “Spring Fleet” of A. D. 1783, with Reminiscences of Connecticut: A Narrative by Walter Bates*, ed. William Odber Raymond (St. Johns, New Brunswick: Barnes & Co., 1889), pp. 8-10. Acknowledgment is due Crary, *The Price of Loyalty*, for identifying the text.

¹⁴ Most Anglican clergymen in America were Loyalists and thus targets of Patriot intimidation.

in close goals [jails], after beating and drawing us through water and mud. Here we lay some time and were to continue in prison until we abjured the king and signed the league and covenant.¹⁵ Many died, one of which was Capt. Peters' son. We were removed from the goal and confined in private houses at our own expense. Capt. Peters and myself were guarded by twelve rebel soldiers, while sick in bed, and we paid dearly for this honor; and others fared in like manner.

I soon recovered from my indisposition and took the first opportunity and fled to Canada, leaving Cossitt, Cole, Peters, Willis, Porter, Sumner, Paptin, etc., in close confinement, where they had misery, insults, and sickness enough. My flight was in 1776, since which my family arrived at Montreal, and inform me that many prisoners died, that Capt. Peters had been tried by court-martial and ordered to be shot for refusing to lead his company against the King's troops. He was afterwards reprieved, but still in goal, and that he was ruined both in health and property; that Cossitt and Cole were alive when they came away, but were under confinement, and had more insults than any of the Loyalists because they had been servants of the Society¹⁶ which, under pretense (as the rebels say) of propagating religion, had propagated loyalty in opposition to the liberties of America.

___ Col. John Peters, letter to his brother, Rev. Samuel Peters, 20 July 1778, excerpts.¹⁷

1776 “never . . . under a worser state of tyranny”

Before leaving Massachusetts for Canada, a Boston physician and Loyalist describes his love of country and sense of danger.

I found I could not stay in Boston and trust my person [i.e., physical safety] with a set of lawless rebels whose actions have disgraced human nature and who have treated all the King's Loyal Subjects that have fallen into their hands with great cruelty and for no other crime than for their Loyalty to the best of Kings and a peaceable Submission to the best constituted Government on Earth. I don't believe there ever was a people in any age or part of the World that enjoy'd so much liberty as the people of America did under the mild indulgent Government (God bless it) of England and never was a people under a worser state of tyranny than they are at present.

___ Dr. Sylvester Gardiner, letter to his son-in-law, 9 May 1776, excerpt.¹⁸

1776 “I have been at a great stand”

Several days after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a New Jersey planter and assemblyman records his initial support for independence, yet within the year he joined the British army.

Sir, it gives a great turn to the minds of our people declaring our independence. Now we know what to depend on. For my part, I have been at a great stand.¹⁹ I could hardly own the King²⁰ and fight against him at the same time, but now these matters are cleared up. Heart and hand shall move together. I don't think there will be five Tories [Loyalists] in our part of the country in ten days after matters are well known. We have had great numbers who would do nothing until we were declared a free State, who now are ready to spend their lives and fortunes in defense of our country.

I must, my dear friend, bid you farewell. May the Supreme Judge of all things sit at the head of our affairs, and give that great and august body, the Congress, wisdom to govern us, and by their wisdom make this continent a great and happy empire. I expect a great turn one way or the other before I see you again.

___ Joseph Barton, letter to his cousin, Henry Wisner, 9 July 1776, excerpt.²¹

¹⁵ Patriot committees in most colonies had, by mid 1775, adopted associations for independence and mandated all citizens to affirm their support for the associations. Those who did not were increasingly pressured to accede.

¹⁶ The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was created in Britain in 1701 to promote and support the Anglican Church (Church of England) in British colonies.

¹⁷ Crary, *The Price of Loyalty*, pp. 69-70; permission request submitted.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-126, citing the Gardiner papers, vol. II, p. 7, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁹ I.e., decision point.

²⁰ Acknowledge allegiance to the king.

²¹ Gerlach, ed., *New Jersey in the American Revolution*, p. 221; citing Clarke and Force, eds., *American Archives: Containing a Documentary History of the United States of America*, 1848-1851, 5th series, 1:139.