

The Gathering Clouds of War

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five,
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

So begins Longfellow's poem describing (although inaccurately) one of the first overt acts of rebellion against the British government back in London. Once put into motion, nothing was to stop this political upheaval, which commenced in 1775.

One aspect of this rebellion that is easily forgotten is that the colony's anger was directed toward Parliament, not the King. Far too much has been written on this side of the Atlantic about how petty, or vindictive, or unfeeling George III was toward his subjects in America. Whatever his shortcomings, he was respected as the head of state, and almost to a man, the colonists swore allegiance to the king, and were willing to lay their lives on the line for him. The problem, as the colonists saw it, was Parliament.

In May 1774 the Connecticut Colonial Legislature, seated in Hartford, passed a series of resolves that identified the main points of dissension. These began as follows: "In the first place, we do most expressly declare, recognize and acknowledge His Majesty King George the third to be the lawful and rightful King of Great Britain and all other of his Dominions and Countries; and that it is the indispensable duty of the people of this colony as being part of His Majesties' Dominion always to bear faithful and true allegiance to his majesty and him to defend to the utmost of their power against all attempts upon his royal person, crown and dignity. Also: That the subjects of His Majesty in this colony ever have had and of right ought to have and enjoy liberties, immunities and privileges of free, natural subjects within any of the Dominions of our said king, his heirs and successors as fully and amply as if they and every of them were born within the realm of England, that they have a property in their own estates and are to be taxed by their own consent, only given in person or by their representative, and are not to be disposed of their liberties and free customs. They are not to be condemned but by lawful judgment of their peers, and that the said rights and immunities are recognized and confirmed to the inhabitants of this colony by the Royal Grant and Charter, and are undoubted rights to all inhabitants of this colony by the Royal Grant and Charter, and are undoubted rights to all inhabitants and purposes whatsoever. Also: That the only lawful representative of the freemen of this colony are the persons they elect to serve as members of the General Assembly thereof. Also: That it is the just right and privilege of His Majesties' liege of this colony to be governed by their General Assembly in the article of taxing and internal policy agreeable to the power and privilege recognized and confirmed in the Royal Charter aforesaid which they have enjoyed for more than a century past, and have neither forfeited nor surrendered."

It goes on to say that changes in the court system adopted capriciously by Parliament are "highly dangerous to the liberties of His Majesties' American subjects, contrary to the Great Charter of English Liberty, and destructive of one of their most darling rights – that of trial by juries, which is justly esteemed one chief excellence of the British Constitution, and a principal bulwark of English liberty."

The concerns of the residents of Norfolk were expressed in their town meeting of June 30, 1774, and the following is taken from their town records, Book 1, covering the years 1758-1776:

“Taking into consideration the truly alarming acts of British Legislature respecting our liberties and in a word all that is dear both with regard to ourselves and all British America; the resolves of our late Honorable House of Representatives being laid before the meeting were highly approved of. Therefore voted that the resolves passed by [them] be entitled at large on the records of this town as contains sentiments worthy to be ever abided by. Then there being laid before the meeting the proceedings and replies of several towns in this colony, we do most heartily approve of and concur with the proceedings and resolves of the several towns in this colony which we have seen in the publick newspapers relative to the oppressive and unconstitutional acts of the British Parliament striking at the foundations of our privileges, civil and religious, and adopt the same accordingly.”

“Giles Pettibone Esq., Mr. Dudley Humphry and Mr. Titus Ives were chosen a committee of correspondence to give and receive all proper intelligence from time to time as occasion may require to and from the committee so chosen in other towns.”

“Voted that we will forthwith contribute to the needs of our poor and distressed brethren at Boston by affording such necessaries and sustenance as they shall stand in need of and our infant State shall admit.”

“Voted that the doings of this meeting be forthwith published in Hartford papers.”

This last statement is very important and has more significance than it initially appears to have. Much has been made of the size of John Hancock’s signature on the Declaration of Independence. Those who signed, sealed their fate by doing so, and could have been put to death if caught by the British forces. Hancock was reported as having said, “There, the King won’t have to put on his spectacles to see that!” The elected officials of Norfolk were no less brave than John Hancock.

Much more is stated in the minutes of Norfolk’s town meeting, but the tone is set here, which I feel is stated in a more relevant way for us living here in Litchfield County in the twenty-first century than anything else written in history books. Many colonists shared the feelings expressed, whether they lived in Massachusetts Bay, Philadelphia or Virginia. These words, however, were written by our forefathers and ancestors, and therefore have more relevancy.

- Bob Grigg