

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE OF COLRAIN

The early settlers of Colrain were independent minded to begin with, and Independence minded they became. Mainly of pure Scotch parentage, they or their immediate ancestors came from Scotland to the North of Ireland under the double inducement of freedom and land taken from the rebellious Catholic subjects. Surrounded as they were by envious and hostile neighbors, and not finding the freedom for which they longed, they were most receptive to ideas of emigration as a group. From the province of Ulster, from the towns about Londonderry and Colrain they began coming to America as early as 1718, settling mainly in New Hampshire in the territory around Londonderry. From here and from Peterboro moved the McKowers, McCollisters, McGrews, McClellans, McGrillisons, McCulloughs, McDonegals, McDonalds, McLanthsams, and others, locating on a tract in what is now Colrain near the Shelburne line and south of Meeting House Hill. They were not the first settlers of Colrain, that honor going to two brothers, Andrew and John Smith, who located first in 1732 about a mile East of Shattuckville, but the Scotch-Irish group was the first large - body of settlers.

The group was one which had retained its identity and relative purity through some 150 years of vicissitudes in Scotland, Ireland, and New Hampshire. They have been characterized as "intensely Protestant and generally Presbyterians and next to the devil they abominated a King." It is not surprising, then, to find them early devotees of the cause of freedom. In September, 1768 a note was passed that "the town shall act on what the Selectmen of the town of Boston have sent to this town, and to send a man to Boston to join the committee of convention there, that is now met, and that James Stewart, Jr., go as our committee man." Boston at this time was occupied by the British troops under General Gage which was the reason for the request from

Boston. Colrain's response was not only a ready one, but perhaps even eager.

In January of 1774 a very important town meeting was held, called to discuss the latest communication from the Committee of Safety at Boston. After Joseph Caldwell was chosen moderator, the meeting adjourned to Mr. John Woods' tavern. At Woods' tavern this independent minded group framed and passed some resolutions which are truly remarkable. The grievances and the holy resolve of resistance set down in Colrain had its fullest expression two and one half years later in the Declaration of Independence with Thomas Jefferson as the principal author.

Some of the Colrain resolves, some of the very phrasing, was perhaps suggested by the Committee of Safety in Boston. Other resolves were being passed in town meetings throughout New England, but those of Colrain have a directness and a clarity which those of other towns lack. It is true that as a group, the Scotch-Irish settlers of Colrain were more literate than most, but there is something beyond that in the Resolves. There is a basic assumption that the problem is greater than mere redress of wrongs, there is a stating of principles of a free, society far ahead of the grievance resolves of other towns, there is a realization of the possibilities of foundation of an American society, Independence. It can be argued that the Colrain Resolves of January 31, 1774 was the forerunner of the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776. Here they are: -

"After receiving the letters sent by the committee of correspondence of Boston to the committee of correspondence of Colrain, and the proceedings of the town of Boston, also, the proceedings of a body of the good people of the province were read; a motion was made whether this town will conform to the firm resolutions of our

respectable brethren at Boston; the question, being put, unanimously passed in the affirmative.

Upon a serious consideration and due sense of our just rights, liberties, and properties, look upon ourselves by the laws of natural reason and common sense to cast in our mite when our eyes behold the daring insults of extravagant men, not only those the other side of the water, but men born and brought up as brethren with us, whose famous abilities gave us just expectations that they would die with us rather than deny us (but, alas! our hopes are gone; designing men had rather sacrifice their whole country, that was bought by their and our glorious ancestry at the price of their blood, then give up so small a profit), since they could not obtain their former desires, as they should get by a little detestable tea sent out by the East India Company, upon conditions unknown. We are sorry to see or hear of any of Adams' posterity so blinded (if the light that is in men be darkness, how great is that darkness). Now, in the present posture of our political affairs, it plainly appears to us that it is the design of this present ministry to serve us as they have our brethren in Ireland - first to raise a revenue from us sufficient to support a standing army, as well as placemen and pensioners, and they laugh at our calamities and glut themselves on our spoil, many of us in this town being eye-witnesses of those cruel and remorseless enemies.

"From just apprehension of the horrors and terror of slavery we are induced to make the following resolves;

"First- Resolved, That as freemen and Englishmen we have a right to the disposal of what is our own, are certain there is not property in that which another can of right take from us without our consent, and, that the measures of late pursued by the Ministry of Great Britain, in their attempts to subject the colonies to taxation by the sole authority of British Parliament, is unjust, arbitrary, inconsistent,

and unconstitutional.

"Secondly- Resolved, That by landing teas in America, imposing a duty by an act of Parliament (as is said) made for the support of gov. etc.. has a direct tendency to subvert our Constitution and to render our General Assembly useless and government arbitrary, as well as bondage and slavery which never was designed by Heaven or earth.

"Thirdly - Resolved, That raising a revenue in America to support placemen and pensioners, who, no doubt, when their scheme is once established, will be as merciless as those task-masters in Egypt, and will silence the murmurs of the people by laying on them greater burdens.

"Fourthly -Resolved- That we do discountenance mobs, unlawful and riotous assemblies; but when our valuable liberties and privileges are trod under foot, and all petitions and remonstrances are rejected and treated with infamy and scorn, it is the duty of every true-hearted American (if possible) to free themselves from impending ruin.

"Fifthly - Resolved, That the late proceedings of the town of Boston, assembled at Boston, to consult measures against the East India Co. have gained the approbation and applause of every true-hearted, honest man, and as their struggle is for the rights purchased by our renowned ancestors, which we esteem as dear as life itself, do fully express our satisfaction.

"Sixthly- Resolved-That we will not, by ourselves, or any under us, directly or indirectly, purchase any tea, neither will we use any on any occasion, until that unrighteous- act be repealed, and will use our utmost endeavours with every person in our town as we have opportunity, that they shall do the same, and those that buy and sell teas contrary to our true intent and meaning, shall be viewed as enemies to their country, and shall be treated as such."

These were the sentiments of the independent minded Scotch-Irish settlers of Colrain two and one-half years before the Declaration of

Independence. Other towns in Franklin County were not quite so militant. Ashfield berated parliament but swore allegiance to the King; Ofld. and Dfld. were quite divided; Charlemont was all for the King and placed all the blame for grievances on the governor; Whately was like Ashfield and so on for the other county towns. Only Colrain seems to have grasped the true spirit of the times, and this because of their background of resistance to monarchical authority.

Let us remember that in 1774 Independence was by no means universally popular. Let us remember, too, that the town meeting in Colrain was just that and not a large group from all the Colonies from which sprang the Declaration of Independence. Certainly the specifics of the Resolves were against the tax on tea, but that merely provided the Colrain town meeting with an opportunity for expressing the basic rights consonant with the dignity of men. I have no doubt that the Committee of Safety in Boston could read between the lines as well as we can, and knew exactly where Colrain stood on Independence. The Sixth and final Resolve, for instance, is ostensibly a statement such as other towns were making that the inhabitants of Colrain would not purchase or use tea until "that unrighteous act be repealed." It then goes on and states that "those that buy and sell teas contrary to our true intent and meaning , shall be viewed as enemies to their country, and shall be treated as such." The phrase, "contrary to our true intent and meaning," is completely unnecessary to the text of the Resolve and was undoubtedly inserted to serve notice to the committee of Safety in Boston that the citizens of Colrain were ready for action.

I also have no doubt that Thomas Jefferson was influenced in part by the sentiments expressed in the Colrain resolves. Take these phrases; "due sense of our just rights, liberties, and properties," "laws of natural reason and common sense," "right to the disposal of what is our own," "no property in that which another can of right

take from us without our consent," "bondage and slavery which never was designed by Heaven or Earth," "valuable liberties and privileges," "rights purchased by our renowned ancestors", "esteem as dear as life itself," "and fully express our satisfaction."

It might almost be a less polished Jefferson writing them. And the ideas expressed, too;

The rights of the individual

No taxation without representation

The legal authority for independence

The right of the group to self-government

The necessity for action

The listing of specific grievances

The necessity for Independence rather than mere change of laws.

The struggle for Independence transcending the individual.

No, these were not ordinary resolves. This was the spirit of America speaking. I think it significant, too, that in the very first Resolve the promise is made that "as freemen and Englishmen we have a right to the disposal of what is our own," and in the fourth Resolve the conclusion is drawn that when such privileges are "trod under foot" that it is the "duty of every true-hearted Americanto free themselves from impending ruin."

The citizens of Colrain in 1774 established principles not to be adopted by the Continental Congress for two and one-half yrs. These Resolves were the Declaration of Independence of Colrain.