

**THE PROVINCIAL
COMMITTEES OF
SAFETY OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

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The Provincial Committees of Safety of the American Revolution by Agnes Hunt

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of the
American Revolution

BY

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THE
PROVINCIAL COMMITTEES OF SAFETY
IN THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION.

CHAPTER I.—NEW ENGLAND.

I. MASSACHUSETTS.

When the American colonists laid by the petition for the musket, prepared to put their strength to the test in defense of their rights, the machinery of the English colonial governments was hampered, and at length rendered helpless by the withdrawal of popular support. That government rested on the supremacy of England over her dependencies, enforced by governors and other royal officials, but workable only with the co-operation of the colonists in their assemblies. When discontent rose to rebellion, the government, comprising two irreconcilable elements in the governors and assemblies, came of necessity to a standstill. The executive attempted to silence the insurrection by dissolving the assemblies, but the people found other channels of expression. Representatives to provincial conventions were elected and gradually assumed entire control.

These conventions served the purpose of deliberative and legislative bodies as well as the former assemblies, but it was difficult for them to perform executive duties on account of their size. Moreover it was impossible to keep such large bodies continually in session, and in the frequent recesses and the intervals between a dissolution and the meeting of a new congress there was need of some system by which the government could be carried on without interrup-

tion. It was to meet these wants that the conventions appointed Committees of Safety during the earlier years of the Revolution. They served as the chief executive of the province in the transition period from colonial to state government.

Opposition culminated early in Massachusetts and that province was the first to choose a Committee of Safety. The spirit of resistance ran high in Boston in the fall of 1774. The white tents of the British on the Common, the cannon that Gage had planted to command the town, the fleet riding in the harbor, brought no thought of submission to the people; rather they were used as effective illustrations by their leaders to point the wrongs of the colonists and the tyranny of England. A martial spirit had sprung up; the people brought together arms and ammunition and drilled in small companies. The situation was discussed in club, convention and committee, and acceptance of armed resistance if necessary was the common outcome of their deliberations.

Alarmed at the firmness displayed by the people and their preparations for defense, Gage felt it unsafe to allow the General Court to meet and issued a proclamation discharging the members from attendance. But the colonists refused to be denied expression at this critical moment. Ninety of the delegates assembled at the time appointed for the Assembly, October 5, 1774, and finding the Governor unwilling to recognize them, formed themselves into a Provincial Congress. A committee was chosen October 20, to consider what was necessary for the safety and defense of the Province and their report was given and accepted on the twenty-sixth.

The Committee reviewed the grievances of the colonies, and while it denied somewhat too strenuously that the people had the most distant idea of attacking or molesting the King's troops in any way, it was held that the necessity of

¹ Journals of the Mass. Prov. Cong. p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

providing against possible contingencies dictated the following measures: first, the appointment of a Committee of Safety to continue in office until further order, whose duty it was to be to keep careful watch of any person attempting "the destruction, invasion, detriment, or annoyance of the province." ✓The Committee or any five of its number (providing not more than one was a citizen of Boston) were authorized, whenever they judged the safety of the people required, to call out the militia to such places as they thought fit, to see that the men were well armed, equipped and provisioned and to keep them in service as long as necessary. ✓All officers and soldiers were earnestly requested to give obedience to the commands of the Committee; ✓second, the appointment of a Committee of Supplies to make provisions for the reception and support of the troops if called out, and to purchase without delay, for the Colony, cannon, small arms and ammunition; ✓third, the appointment of general officers to command the forces. ✓The militia were recommended to choose company officers and to enlist minute-men ready to march at the first call of the Committee of Safety. The inhabitants were urged to perfect themselves in military discipline and to provide arms and powder.*

These proposals spoke plainly of war. The Congress foresaw its probability and was determined to meet it well prepared. ✓It was left with the Committee of Safety to take the decisive step of calling the troops into the field and of turning the struggle from passive resistance to civil war. Like a sentinel it was to watch the approach of the enemy and give the signal for attack.

✓The Committee was chosen on October 27, 1774, and was composed of nine members, three from Boston and six from the country districts. ✓It existed until February 9, 1775, when a new Committee of Safety was chosen of eleven

* Journals of the Mass. Prov. Cong. pp 32, 33, 35.

* Ibid, p 35.

members, most of them, however, identical with those of the first appointment. As time passed and the situation became more critical the Provincial Congress realized the danger of leaving entirely to the Committee of Safety the decision of the grounds and time for resistance. In this second appointment therefore the Committee was authorized to call out the militia only if an attempt were made to execute by force the two laws, "for the Better Government of Massachusetts," and "for the Impartial Administration of Justice." Even as thus limited the discretionary power of the Committee was large. What constituted a forcible attempt to carry out the laws might be open to dispute, and the Committee might give the signal on too slight occasion. The support of the other colonies was not assured, while weighed with England in numbers, resources and military skill, Massachusetts hung but lightly in the balance. The thought that the Committee, in its confidence and enthusiasm, might force the conflict prematurely, made the more thoughtful afraid of its power. Joseph Hawley, a member of the Provincial Congress, wrote from Northampton on February 22, 1775, "I have been most seriously contemplating the commission and most important trust of our Committee of Safety, and especially that branch of it which relates to their mustering the minute-men, and others of the militia. . . . the soldiers when thus mustered. . . . will suppose it their duty to fight they will suppose the continent to have devolved the resolution of that question upon this province, and that this province has devolved it on the Committee of Safety and that the Committee by calling them, have decided it. . . . Thus hostilities will be commenced. . . . I beg of you therefore, as you love your country, to use your utmost influence with our Committee of Safety that the people be not mustered, and hostilities be not commenced, until we have the express categorical decision of the continent, that the time is absolutely come that hostilities ought to com-

* Journals of the Mass. Prov. Cong. p 90.

mence.¹⁰ Events, however, demanded positive action of Massachusetts too soon to obtain such united assent.

✓The Committee of Safety came together for the first time November 7, 1774. ✓There seems to have been no doubt in the minds of the members from the first that the outcome of events was to be war. ✓The first day the Committee of Supplies was recommended to buy large amounts of pork, flour, rice and other provisions, and store them at Worcester and Concord.¹ In the following week, spades, shovels, mess-bowls, fuses, cannon and ball were collected and deposited at the two places. ✓On February 23, 1775, the Committee ordered the officers to assemble one-fourth of the militia, not for a general muster, but in order that the troops might meet for drill throughout the Province.²

✓Afraid that Gage would attempt to capture the war stores that had been collected, the Committee appointed watches on March fourteenth and fifteenth, to guard them. Teams were kept in readiness to remove them and couriers provided to alarm the towns on the first news of a hostile movement of the British.³

On the eighteenth of April the Committee of Safety was in session at a tavern in Menotomy (now Arlington). After the sitting, two of the members, Mr. Devens and Mr. Watson, left the others to go to Charlestown, but meeting an unusual number of British officers on the road, turned back to alarm their comrades. Later in the evening Devens received certain information that the enemy were in motion, and went at once to warn Gerry, Hancock, and Adams. He then started Paul Revere on his ride to Lexington and Concord. ✓Through his efforts and those of the other couriers employed by the Committee, Gage's secret was the property of the country side before morning.¹⁰

¹ Joseph Hawley to Thomas Cushing: Journals of the Mass. Prov. Cong. p 748.

² During the first months the Committee of Safety and Committee of Supplies sat together. Journals of the Mass. Prov. Cong., p. 305.

³ Journals of the Mass. Prov. p 510. Frothingham's Warren p 420.

⁴ Journals of the Mass. Prov. Cong. p 513.

¹⁰ Narrative of Richard Devens, quoted in Frothingham's Siege of Boston p 57.

√The battle of Lexington marks the opening of the war and the Committee of Safety bent its energies to raise forces and concentrate them around Boston as rapidly as possible. The Provincial Congress was not in session and responsibility in the crisis rested with the Committee. On the day after the battle a circular letter was sent to the different Massachusetts towns, telling the news, and setting forth in the strongest terms the need of an army, and begging them to encourage the enlistment of soldiers and to send them forward to Cambridge.¹¹ They determined to raise eight thousand capable men from the Massachusetts forces, to organize them into regiments and place them under proper discipline. In this way, it was hoped, the nucleus of an efficient army would be formed.¹² Troops were asked from Connecticut and Rhode Island, and the New Hampshire men in the Province were enlisted in the Massachusetts regiments.

√The Provincial Congress met on the twenty-second of April and took general control of affairs, sending for the Committee of Safety to report on the situation and to present whatever plans it had in readiness.¹³ Throughout the session the Committee made frequent suggestions to the legislature and its advice was usually adopted. √Occasionally the Congress referred matters to the Committee for consideration, asking it, for example, to form a plan for the establishment of the army, to decide on the expediency of removing war stores from the coast, or to report on the advisability of a further issue of paper money.¹⁴ As the Congress sat usually at Watertown and the Committee at Cambridge, where the troops were collecting, √much trouble and loss of time was involved in carrying messages between the two places, and the Committee was often too busy to attend to the questions of the Congress until the

¹¹ *Journals of the Mass. Prov. Cong.* p 518. The Provincial Congress adjourned April 15, 1775 and reopened April 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 520.

¹³ *Journals of the Mass. Prov. Cong.* p 148.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 148, 210, 464, 588.