

**JOHN  
LANGDON**

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John Langdon by Charles R. Corning

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BY

CHARLES R. CORNING

DELIVERED BEFORE THE NEW HAMPSHIRE SOCIETY OF  
SONS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION  
APRIL 19, 1898

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## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOHN LANGDON.

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The 19th of April is a date of singular significance in the calendar of American history. It is also a day of peculiar endearment to every patriot heart. Lexington and Concord, the announcement of peace with Great Britain, the passage of the Massachusetts Sixth through the scowling and hissing mobs of secession in Baltimore city. Oh, rich, natal day of Independence and Union! How we of this generation, almost touching the dial hands of another century, should remember and honor this auspicious day. Let us resolve that the bright fire of this society be annually kindled, that its members, the descendants of those who struck the first blow for national supremacy may commingle with those who, eighty-six years later, struck the last blow that made this nation one and indivisible. Here let us renew our oaths of perpetual allegiance to the welfare of our country; here let us try ourselves by the lofty standard of the fathers, and be inspired by their revered memory.

Wednesday, the 19th of April, 1775, was no surprise to the Sons of Liberty. The storm had long been growing dark and the air was full of electricity; only the final spark needed to be touched. For ten years the possibility of war had been felt by the leaders. For two years, at least, its probability had been realized by the people. For a month its certainty was recognized by friend and foe. General Gage was a tried soldier who knew the temper and the fibre of the Americans, for he had fought side by side with Washington at Braddock's defeat twenty years before; he saw the situation and read aright the signs of the times. Sam Adams, more radical than the Revolution itself, and John Hancock, the man of station and wealth, spoke the loudest. The orders were given, and the red coats, embarking at the foot of Boston common, were silently rowed across the Charles to the Cambridge shore, whence they began their early morning march. And so, in characters of blood, was written the birth of American independence. But you know the whole thrilling story of the minute

men and the battle at the bridge, and of the harassed retreat of the king's vanquished army back to the patriot capital.

April 19 was but the culmination of the dissent and resistance that the clear thinkers of England had long foreseen. Less than a month earlier Burke had made his great speech on conciliation, and with prophetic words pictured the attitude of the Americans.

"Another circumstance in our colonies," said he, "which contributes no mean part towards the growth and effect of this intractable spirit is their education. In no country, perhaps, in the world is the law so general a study. The profession itself is numerous and powerful, and in most provinces it takes the lead. The greater number of the deputies sent to the congress were lawyers. But all who read, and most do read, endeavor to obtain some smattering in that science. I have been told by an eminent bookseller, that in no branch of his business, after tracts of popular devotion, were so many books as those on the law exported to the plantations. I hear that they have sold nearly as many of Blackstone's Commentaries in America as in England. General Gage marks out this disposition very particularly in a letter on your table. He states that all the people in his government are lawyers or smattered in law,—and that in Boston they have been enabled, by successful chicane, wholly to evade many parts of one of your capital penal constitutions. This study renders men acute, inquisitive, dexterous, prompt in attack, ready in debate, full of resources. In other countries, the people, more simple and of a less mercurial cast, judge of an ill principle in government only by an actual grievance; here they anticipate the evil, and judge of the pressure of the grievance by the badness of the principle. They augur misgovernment at a distance and snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze."

The eloquent lips of the Irish orator uttered the cardinal note of the Whig party of England, the party of constitutional prerogative. So spoke imperious Chatham and Barré, and later, Richmond and Rockingham. It was the golden prelude to another chapter in Anglo-Saxon freedom. The Revolution was but an emphatic development in the evolution of man's individuality. It was bound to come; peaceably if possible, violently if it must; for the seed whence it sprang had been sown at Runnymede.

It was a long and disheartening succession of centuries from Runnymede to the surrender at Appomattox, and more than once the light of liberty was recognized solely by its fitful shadows. But, in God's providence, the precious spark was preserved. It survived



the tortures of monarchs and the decay of ages, until it gleamed in the glad wilderness of the new world. Jamestown and Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay are the white marks showing the way from Runnymede and Naseby to Bunker Hill and Gettysburg. They are the splendid sunbursts over a larger and holier freedom.

The prerevolutionary annals of the thirteen colonies were but the advancing steps in the development of the greater history of governments and its relations to the people. Taxation without representation was an incident, not cumulative but suggestive. The tea tax, the disciplinary Boston Port bill, were, as we look upon them now, the benignant signs of a new evolution of civic progress. Sam Adams interpreted them with a clearer vision than any of his associates. Each ministerial aggression was to him a corner-stone of the new edifice. He saw nothing to regret in the commotion of the hour, for to him revolution was purely the result of two stupendous factors, namely, dissatisfaction with existing ideas, and dissatisfaction with existing practices. Selfishness was the ruling passion in the British cabinet. George the Third, remembering the words of his mother, determined to be king. The Board of Trade made the American Revolution possible. No one set of men, no particular ministry, no specific act or resolve, not Townsend nor North, occasioned the war. It was the baleful spirit of commerce that insisted on governing a people by the rules and customs decreed by parliamentary ignorance. And, therefore, in spite of bribes and official fawning, England found the colonies as one. Do what she would, the colonies were as resolute in 1768 as they were in 1775. "We should stand upon the broad common ground of those natural rights that we all feel and know as men and descendants of Englishmen. I wish the charters may not ensnare us at last, by drawing different colonies to act differently in this great cause. Whenever that is the case, all will be over with the whole. There ought to be no New England man, no New Yorker, known on the continent; but all of us Americans." Thus spoke the patriotic Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina.

The British ministry would not believe that acts directed against Massachusetts would be resented in Virginia. Common cause was a truth rejected utterly in the councils of the king. When the charter of Massachusetts had been annulled and the Boston Port bill enacted in retaliation for the tea party, Washington exclaimed, "I will raise one thousand men, subsist them at my own expense, and march myself at their head for the relief of Boston." When compensation for the drenched tea was bruited Gadsden cried out, "Don't pay for

an ounce of the damned tea." But still the ministry, stolid in its conceit, kept on playing with the sacred fire. As the time for action drew near, the altars of Liberty, dotting the coast from the St. Croix to the Savannah, burst into steadier flame and arched the western horizon with a glow never before seen by man. Georgia and New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Virginia were acting as one. The rice planter of the South and the farmer on the New England hills made a common cause, and the grand march toward independence had begun. The committees of correspondence were enriching the literature of human liberty, while the great heart of the colonies beat responsive to the duties of the hour. Royal authority was waning, and the government of the people waxed stronger as the crisis drew near. Dear old New Hampshire and her patriot sons, empty of purse but resolute of soul, hesitated never a moment at the grave parting of the ways. From her only seaport she too had sent away the tea ships, and her people cried Amen.

And with what orderly steps the men of the Revolution approached the crisis! Violence was foreign to their natures, passion played a minor part, while hatred of the mother country was far from their hearts. And yet the whole land was in arms, but laws were not silent. Then grievances were real, and forms of dissent were expressed in phrase so simple that every man, be he high or low, lettered or ignorant, comprehended the questions of the time and understood the remedy. As yet no sectional jealousies cast their dark shadows; liberty in all its purity was the ideal, and the dedication of its temple was the one solemn purpose in all the thirteen colonies. The men of America had given deep thought to this question. The head and the heart had gone over every argument again and again; nothing was left to chance. The people had been educated to meet the trials of such a time, and their leaders took care to preserve personal liberty and property so as not to bring reproach on the sacredness of their cause.

In New Hampshire resistance to unjust laws was an early plant, and the men of 1774 were repeating in the same theater the scenes of 1684. The names of the actors were changed but the play was strikingly similar. When Edward Randolph came to Portsmouth in 1680, bearing the royal commission as collector of the king's revenue, and began laying unlawful taxes on the commerce of the town, old President Cutts stood across his path and bade him stop. Then came Cranfield, the new governor, bent on usurpation, who kept adjourning the little assembly, hoping at last to con-

vene one subservient to his wishes; but he misjudged the New Hampshire colonists, and in his vexation wrote to the royal secretary of state that "the people are of such mutinous disposition that it is not safe to let them convene." Then he took to governing autocratically by imposing taxes in defiance of provincial law, and in a moment the scattered farmers were one in the common defense. Some of his sheriffs retreated before the clubs of the outraged citizens, while others, attempting to enter the houses to serve their master's writs, were routed by the women pouring scalding water on their heads. The military was called out but not a soldier appeared, and the first fight for personal liberty was fought and won on New Hampshire soil. With the mothers' songs of those days ringing in their ears, what could be expected from the men and women of New Hampshire one hundred years later? As Randolph and Cranfield found their Cutts and their Moody, so Wentworth found his Weare and his Langdon. With regular and orderly steps our ancestors marched to the music of the Revolution, and when the day for action arrived swift messengers spurring over the land found preparation everywhere, so thorough had been the work of the different committees of correspondence.

It seemed as if the whole air was surcharged with the one common thought of the epoch. The expressions of the Virginia house of burgesses found instant response in the New Hampshire assembly. In May, 1773, our assembly voted to instruct its committee to reply to the letter of the Virginia house of burgesses, and a little later appointed a committee of correspondence consisting of seven members. At the same time, Mr. Speaker Wentworth, not Governor John, in addressing the Virginia house, wrote in nervous phrase, saying that in every constitutional plan for securing the rights of British America and removing the present infringements thereon, "our sister colonies may rely that we sincerely join, having no work for ourselves of an exclusive nature in those matters, ever looking on the whole as embarked in the same common bottom."

Events moved fast and the separation grew wider, so in February, 1774, we find the speaker of our New Hampshire assembly now addressing the Massachusetts house. "By the best intelligence we can obtain, it appears that the British ministry are resolved in a great degree, if not fully, to enslave the inhabitants of the colonies in America subject to the crown of Great Britain, if by any means they can effect it, which much concerns the Americans to withstand and prevent. The proposed method of union in all the colonies