

Seventeen Hundred Levellers with Firearms

To make sure the Stamp Act was not obeyed, groups of men organized in each colony, calling themselves the Sons of Liberty. Men appointed to collect the stamp tax were pressured, if necessary with threats of violence, to resign their posts. In Boston the Sons of Liberty forced their way into Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson's mansion, wrecked it, and burned his papers. "The hellish crew," said Hutchinson, "fell upon my house with the rage of devils." The disorder and confusion were so widespread that parents complained they could not get their children back to their set routines of going to school or to bed.

Following Virginia's lead, delegates from nine colonies met in a Stamp Act Congress in New York in October 1765. They petitioned the Crown against taxation without their consent and then urged the colonies to boycott British goods. Parliament backed down at the uproar and repealed the Stamp Act. But it stood by its right to tax the colonies. As long as Parliament insisted on that, trouble would not go away. The colonists were by now too experienced, too skillful, too militant to let the Crown play with their rights.

Popular protest against denial of what the colonists felt to be their rights erupted in many places. North of

Levellers ms

ot obeyed, groups of
illing themselves the
collect the stamp tax
threats of violence, to
ons of Liberty forced
or Thomas Hutchin-
ned his papers. "The
'fell upon my house
order and confusion
complained they could
set routines of going

ates from nine colo-
in New York in Oc-
own against taxation
rged the colonies to
backed down at the
t. But it stood by its
s Parliament insisted
y. The colonists were
ul, too militant to let

of what the colonists
any places. North of

New York City lay great blocks of land acquired by patronage and fraud. The Livingston family, for example, had expanded a grant of a few thousand acres into a holding of 160,000 acres—this by plain fraud when the boundaries were drawn. The lordship of such a great estate brought rich rewards. The aristocrats expected their tenants to sweat to make them even wealthier and to bow down to them when they passed. Knowing how the land had been grabbed illegally, some tenants claimed title to the farmlands they worked. The landlords called them Levellers, after the name of a popular party that sprang up during the English Revolution of the 1640s. They held all people were born free and equal, and their ideas foreshadowed many of the elements of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The tenants refused to pay their rents and, when threatened, rioted against the sheriff's deputies. By the spring of 1766 the situation grew so tense that British troops were called in. In his journal Captain John Montresor notes what happened:

APRIL 29, 1766.

The city, alarmed from the approach of the country Levellers, called the Westchester men. The militia ordered to hold themselves in readiness. Letters received from them in town declaring that if Mr. Cortlandt does not give them a grant forever to his lands, they will march with their body now collected and pull down his house in town and also one belonging to Mr. Lambert Moore.

MAY 1, 1766.

x men (a committee from Westchester people being 00 men now lying at King's Bridge) came into town to explain matters. . . . The military applied to on account of the Levellers on which they dispersed . . .

MAY 6, 1766.

reclamation issued 100£ reward for the taking of Pendergrast, chief of the country Levellers and 50£ for either Munro and Finch, two officers.

JUNE 28, 1766.

advices from the Manor of Livingston that the Levellers have rose there to the number of 500 men, 200 of which had marched to murder the lord of the manor and level his house, unless he would sign leases for 'em agreeable to their form, as theirs were now expired, and that they would neither pay rent, taxes, etc., nor suffer other tenants. The Levellers met by Mr. Walter Livingston, the son, who made a sally with 40 armed men—the 200 having only sticks—obliged them to retire, not without their threatening a more respectable visit on the return of Colonel Livingston of the Manor.

JUNE 29, 1766.

seventeen hundred of the Levellers with firearms are collected at Poughkeepsie. All the jails broke open through all the counties this side of Albany, of the east side of the river, by people headed by Pendergrast. Eight thousand cartridges sent up to the 28th Regt. . . .

ADVETISEMENT.

THE Members of the Association of the Sons of Liberty, are requested to meet at the City-Hall, at one o'Clock, To-morrow, (being Friday) on Business of the most Importance;—And every other Friend to the Liberties, and Trade of America, are hereby most cordially invited, to meet at the same Time and Place.

Thursday, NEW-YORK, 14th December, 1773.

The Sons of Liberty and their supporters are called to a meeting in New York. Some of the most prosperous and respectable colonials were among the leaders.

JULY 10, 1766.

This morning arrived the 28th Regiment with Pendergrast, the principal country rebel ringleader.

AUGUST 6, 1766.

Accounts from the Circuit, Pendergrast is indicted for high treason.

AUGUST 19, 1766.

Wm. Pendergrast, who was tried at Poughkeepsie and found guilty of high treason and received sentence of death, begged leave of the court to admit him to deliver a few words, viz: "That if opposition to government was deemed rebellion, no member of that court were entitled to set upon his trial."

From "Journals of Captain John Montross, 1757-1778,"
New-York Historical Society, Collections, XIV.