

♦ ♦ ♦ FROM REGULATORS TO REVOLUTIONARIES ♦ ♦ ♦

NORTH CAROLINA'S PATH FROM COLONY TO STATE

LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students can:

- ♦ *Explain the historical significance of the Edenton Tea Party.*
- ♦ *Identify the achievements of each of North Carolina's four provincial congresses.*
- ♦ *Explain the historical significance of the Mecklenburg Resolves.*
- ♦ *Compare the similarities and differences between the Regulator Rebellion and the American Revolution in North Carolina.*

Before the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776, the residents of North Carolina and other colonies were trying to figure out what to do about British control. At first, most people (in North Carolina and elsewhere) just wanted the British to remove taxes, such as the tax on tea, and stay out of colonists' local affairs. But some colonial leaders were beginning to think about bigger steps.

North Carolina was the first of the original 13 colonies to call for independence. Here is the story of that progression.

BACKGROUND: REGULATOR REBELLION, 1768–1771

The story of North Carolina's move to independence starts around 1768 — long before there was talk of separating from England. A group of men calling themselves Regulators rebelled against the North Carolina government. These men were farmers, who, for the most part, lived in the Piedmont and Mountain regions of North Carolina, which, at that time, were called the North Carolina "**backcountry.**" Many of North Carolina's backcountry farmers had come by wagon from Pennsylvania. They were rightly upset because taxes were high and because towns and counties were often run by corrupt officials.

At the time, North Carolina's government consisted of a powerful colonial governor (representing Great Britain) and a legislative assembly composed of two parts. One part of the colonial legislative assembly was the governor's appointed council. The other part was the House of Commons, whose members were elected by the population of the colony (although not everyone living in the colony was allowed to vote). In reality, North Carolina's House of Commons and the governor's council were both controlled by wealthy farm owners from the eastern region of the state. Since the eastern region of the state had been settled before the backcountry, eastern counties had obtained the right to send more delegates to the House of Commons. So, at that time, North Carolina was divided. When describing this difference, one historian wrote, "the flood of immigrants in the backcountry had created a separate and very distinct world, one decidedly different from the plantation society of eastern North Carolina."¹

The Regulators were opposed to three groups within the colonial government that (as far as the Regulators were concerned) were



abusing the colonists' rights: the British governor of the colony, local officials (appointed by the governor), and the elite members of the colonial House of Commons. The Regulators' anger with their treatment eventually led to armed conflict with Governor William Tryon's militia at the Battle of Alamance in April 1771. The Regulators lost. After the battle, some of the Regulators were put to death by hanging. Many others were pardoned after they signed an oath of loyalty. Two of their leaders escaped.

People living in the North Carolina backcountry considered the Regulators to be heroes. The uprising's popularity showed that, years before the beginning of the American Revolutionary War, North Carolinians already possessed a strong desire for freedom and fair treatment.

EDENTON TEA PARTY

In the 1760s, the British Parliament began taxing American colonists. Because of earlier protests, by 1773 most of those taxes had been removed, but the British Parliament continued to tax imported tea. In 1774, following the **Boston Tea Party** (when residents of the city of Boston sneaked onto British ships and threw crates of imported tea overboard), the British Parliament passed several laws called the Coercive Acts, which were intended to punish the Massachusetts colony. (American colonists called these laws the Intolerable Acts.) One of these laws closed the Boston Harbor. Other states, including North Carolina, sympathized with the Bostonians and sent food and other supplies to aid the people of Boston. Then North Carolina had its own tea party!

In October 1774, 51 women in Edenton, North Carolina, signed a letter declaring that they were boycotting British tea and clothing. They spoke out in support of the men of Edenton, who had just started their own boycott. The letter from the women of Edenton was addressed to British political leaders and was widely read in Britain. It was historically significant as one of the first organized political activities by American women.

NORTH CAROLINA'S PROVINCIAL CONGRESSES

When the American Revolution began, North Carolina's legislative assembly was under the control of the governor, who had been appointed by the British government. So North Carolinians who supported the revolution created a separate legislative assembly, which they called the North Carolina Provincial Congress. (Before the Declaration of Independence, the 13 states were called "colonies" or sometimes "provinces.")

FIRST PROVINCIAL CONGRESS

In August 1774, two months before the Edenton Tea Party, a group of men (some of them calling themselves "Sons of Liberty") held North Carolina's First Provincial Congress. (At that time, the word "**congress**" just meant a meeting.) John Harvey presided over the meeting. Representatives at this meeting expressed their support for the people of Massachusetts and agreed to send representatives to another meeting of all the colonies (which became known as the First Continental Congress). They elected three delegates to attend the Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

The First Continental Congress met in September 1774. Its goal was to try to reach an agreement on how to respond to the Coercive Acts. One of the achievements of the First Continental Congress was to call for the creation of Committees of Safety in each colony to enforce the boycott on British goods.

SECOND PROVINCIAL CONGRESS

North Carolina's First Provincial Congress had been organized in secret. However, in April 1775, a Second Provincial Congress was held openly in New Bern, which was North Carolina's capital. In fact, the Provincial Congress was organized in the same town and on the same day as the Colonial Assembly called by the

colony's (unelected) governor. Many of the same men attended both the Provincial Congress and the Colonial Assembly!

The representatives at the Provincial Congress wanted to show the governor that it could meet and act independently, without his control. However, Governor Martin was outraged that a group of men from throughout the colony would dare to organize their own unofficial assembly, so he quickly **dissolved** (ended) the formal meeting of the Colonial Assembly.

At around the same time, a group of leaders in Mecklenburg County (where the city of Charlotte is located) decided to prepare for war. This group wrote a document declaring that the links between Great Britain and Mecklenburg County were ended. The document described a plan for organizing a military force and an independent county government. This document is known as the **Mecklenburg Resolves**.

THIRD PROVINCIAL CONGRESS

At North Carolina's Third Provincial Congress in August 1775, representatives made plans to create an army and organize North Carolina's government. (By this point, the colonial governor had fled his home and was living on a ship in the Cape Fear River, so he was no longer directly involved in the politics of the colony.)

The Third Provincial Congress declared itself the supreme **legislative assembly** (lawmaking group) in North Carolina. Representatives at this meeting chose a Provincial Council who would have the power to carry out the laws. With this meeting, North Carolina moved closer to calling for full independence from Great Britain. Representatives at the next provincial congress would make this call.

FOURTH PROVINCIAL CONGRESS

In April 1776, this meeting was held in the small town of Halifax, located in eastern North Carolina. By this point, many North Carolinians favored full independence from Great Britain and wholeheartedly supported the Patriot cause. There had already been a battle in North Carolina between Loyalists and Patriots at Moore's Creek Bridge.

Representatives at the meeting in Halifax signed a document calling for North Carolina and the other colonies to separate entirely from Great Britain by declaring independence. This document became known as the Halifax Resolves. According to the document, the Provincial Congress "empowered" (empowered) its delegates at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia "to concur with the other delegates of the other Colonies in declaring Independency, and forming foreign Alliances."²

The leaders of the North Carolina Provincial Congress sent the Halifax Resolves to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. As one historian says, the resolves were "well received."³

It didn't take long for leaders from throughout the 13 colonies to agree with the representatives at the North Carolina Provincial Congress. On July 4, 1776, the delegates in the Continental Congress declared the 13 colonies to be "free and independent states" completely independent of Great Britain. With this Declaration of Independence, the United States of America was born!

READING REVIEW QUESTIONS:

Why was the Edenton Tea Party historically significant?

What was achieved at North Carolina's First Provincial Congress?

Make an inference about support for the American Revolution in western North Carolina in 1775, based on the Mecklenburg Resolves.

What was achieved at North Carolina's Third Provincial Congress?

What was achieved at North Carolina's Fourth Provincial Congress?

Describe the similarities and differences between the Regulator Rebellion and the American Revolution in North Carolina.

ENDNOTES

- 1 William A. Link, *North Carolina: Change and Tradition in a Southern State* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2018), 99.
- 2 "The Halifax Resolves," NCpedia, accessed October 9, 2024, <https://www.ncpedia.org/history/usrevolution/halifax-resolves>.
- 3 William S. Powell, *North Carolina through Four Centuries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 184.