

## Chapter 27: Independence Seems to Be the Word

There are seasons in history when people sense the change before they can explain it. By the middle of April 1776, the American colonies had reached such a season. The language had shifted. The conversations had hardened. The polite fiction that reconciliation might still be possible was beginning to collapse under its own weight.

The word was no longer avoided.

Independence.

It had spread not through proclamations from Congress, but through pamphlets, taverns, sermons, and letters carried by tired riders over muddy roads. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* had done its work. It did not create the desire for separation, but it gave that desire a vocabulary. People who had once grumbled now argued. People who had once hesitated now leaned forward.

Abigail Adams captured it plainly in a letter to her husband. Independence, she wrote, seems to be the word.

And yet, for all this rising clarity among the people, the body charged with acting on it stood still.

The Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, was paralyzed.

This was not cowardice alone, though fear played its part. Independence was not merely a political preference. It was treason. To declare it openly was to place one's name, one's family, and one's future squarely beneath the shadow of the gallows. Congress debated, delayed, and deferred. Delegates from several colonies lacked clear instructions. In places like New York, authority itself had become uncertain. Royal governors had fled. Colonial assemblies had been dissolved and reassembled in improvised forms. The machinery of government was in motion, but without a steady hand at the controls.

While Congress wrestled with the question, events moved on without it.

The British had their own plans. In the South, they intended to split the colonies by force, rallying Loyalist support and reasserting control where they believed resistance to be weaker. North Carolina became a focal point of that effort. There, the divisions within the colony were not abstract. They were personal, sharp, and often violent.

The Loyalist element, many of them Highland Scots, remained fiercely devoted to King George III. They carried with them not only loyalty, but a cultural identity bound tightly to crown and tradition. Opposing them were Patriots, many of Scots-Irish descent, equally stubborn, equally certain, and increasingly unwilling to tolerate imperial authority.

This was not a polite disagreement between gentlemen. It was a fracture.

The tension broke at Moores Creek Bridge in February 1776. The engagement itself was brief, almost peculiar in its details. Patriot forces, anticipating a Loyalist advance, removed the planks from a narrow bridge and greased the remaining beams. When Loyalist militia attempted to charge across in the early morning darkness, they found themselves trapped, exposed, and unable to advance. The Patriots fired into them at close range. Men fell, some into the creek below, weighed down by heavy clothing and equipment. The Loyalist force collapsed.

The battle did more than produce a tactical victory. It shattered the British Southern strategy before it could take hold. Reinforcements from England were delayed. Geography worked against any easy landing. The grand design unraveled.

More importantly, Moores Creek Bridge settled a question in the minds of many North Carolinians. If reconciliation had been possible, it would have required a partner willing to meet them halfway. The Crown had shown no such willingness. The attempt to impose control by force had failed.

What remained was a choice.

In April 1776, delegates from across North Carolina gathered in the town of Halifax for the Fourth Provincial Congress. There were eighty-three of them, representing a colony that was neither the largest nor the most influential among the thirteen. They did not possess the prestige of Massachusetts or the political weight of Virginia. What they did possess was clarity.

Colonel Robert Howe expressed it bluntly. Independence seems to be the word, he said. He knew of not one dissenting voice.

This unity did not arise from comfort. It came from necessity. North Carolina had become, in many respects, a model of the broader colonial condition. Authority was unsettled. Conflict was internal as well as external. The old structures no longer functioned. The new ones had not yet fully formed.

The Congress convened with a practical mandate. They were to determine defensive measures for the colony and to articulate their grievances against the Crown. To that end, they appointed a committee of seven men, chaired by Cornelius Harnett. Alongside him were Allen Jones, Thomas Burke, Abner Nash, John Kinchen, Thomas Person, and Thomas Jones. These were not names widely remembered outside their state, though they would leave their mark in other ways, in towns and counties that still bear them.

For four days, the committee worked.

They did not invent grievances. Those had accumulated over years, discussed in assemblies, printed in pamphlets, and argued in homes. What the committee did was gather them, shape them, and commit them to paper with purpose. They cited the usurpation of power by King and Parliament. They described the devastation wrought by military actions. They noted the seizure of American ships. They condemned the conduct of royal governors such as Josiah Martin.

Some grievances reflected the harsh realities of the time, including fears inflamed by British policies regarding enslaved people. Lord Dunmore's proclamation offering freedom to those who took up arms against their masters had struck deeply in the southern colonies. It was seen not merely as a military tactic, but as a threat to the social order. This uncomfortable truth, like many others, formed part of the broader case against British rule.

When the committee completed its work, it presented its findings to the Congress.

On April 12, 1776, the delegates adopted what became known as the Halifax Resolves.

The decision was swift. There is little evidence of prolonged debate. The sense of inevitability had overtaken hesitation. The Resolves did not declare independence outright. That step, in a formal sense, still lay ahead. Instead, they did something both precise and profound.

They authorized North Carolina's delegates in the Continental Congress to vote for independence.

This distinction matters. The Resolves did not instruct those delegates to introduce the question in Congress. That remained a separate matter. But they removed the uncertainty. When the question arose, as it surely would, the answer from North Carolina would be yes.

In addition to this authorization, the Resolves called for unity among the colonies. They encouraged others to follow the same course. They recognized the necessity of foreign alliances, an acknowledgment that independence, once declared, would require support. They also asserted the right of North Carolina to form its own constitution and govern itself, an early and clear expression of state sovereignty.

These were not idle words. They were a blueprint.

The Resolves were quickly printed and sent north to Philadelphia. There, they were placed in the hands of North Carolina's delegates, Joseph Hewes, William Hooper, and John Penn. The document arrived in a Congress still struggling to find its footing.

It began to change the conversation.

Until that moment, the idea of independence had lingered at the edges of formal debate, acknowledged but avoided. Now, a colony had taken an official position. It had not merely spoken of independence. It had instructed its representatives to act upon it.

Others took notice.

Rhode Island would move in May, followed by Virginia, which went further by authorizing its delegates to introduce a resolution for independence in Congress. One by one, the colonies aligned their instructions with the emerging reality. The hesitation that had characterized the early months of 1776 began to give way.

The sequence of events is revealing. February 27 brought the victory at Moores Creek Bridge. April 12 produced the Halifax Resolves. By June, Richard Henry Lee would introduce his resolution for independence. On July 4, the Declaration would be adopted.

The path from uncertainty to action was not a straight line, but Halifax marked a decisive turn.

North Carolina did not possess the power to secure independence on its own. Its population and resources were limited compared to larger colonies. Yet leadership in history does not always come from the largest or the most prominent. Sometimes it comes from those who are simply ready.

The legacy of the Halifax Resolves endures in tangible form. The date April 12, 1776 appears on the flag of North Carolina, a reminder of the moment when the colony stepped forward. Alongside it is another date, May 20, 1775, associated with the so-called Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. That earlier claim remains a subject of debate among historians, lacking clear contemporary documentation. The Halifax Resolves, by contrast, stand on firm ground.

They are not myth. They are record.

In the months that followed, the language first gathered in places like Halifax would find its way into the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson, tasked with drafting the document, drew upon a body of thought that had been forming across the colonies. The grievances, the assertions, the principles were not his alone. They were the distilled experience of a people who had come to believe that separation was both necessary and justified.

In that sense, the charge of plagiarism sometimes raised in jest carries a deeper truth. The Declaration was not the work of a single mind. It was the expression of a collective conviction.

The Halifax Resolves represent one of the clearest early statements of that conviction.

They also reveal something essential about the nature of the American Revolution. It was not driven solely from the top down. Congress did not lead the people to independence. The people, through their assemblies and conventions, pushed Congress toward a decision it might otherwise have delayed.

This dynamic would shape the course of the Revolution and the nation that followed. Authority would be contested, negotiated, and defined not only by leaders, but by the expectations and actions of those they represented.

In April 1776, in a small town along the Roanoke River, a group of delegates chose clarity over caution. They recognized what many already felt. The ties to Britain could not be repaired. The risks of independence were great, but the risks of continued submission were greater.

Independence, it seemed, was the word.

And once spoken with authority, it could not be taken back.