

A petition to protect families of Loyalists

Petition in the Executive Letter Book, *Colonial & State Records*, vol. 16, pp. 467–69.

As you read...

RETALIATION AGAINST LOYALISTS

When the British occupied Wilmington in 1781, they forced the families of leading Patriots to leave town. Most stayed with friends in the country nearby during the occupation. When the Americans retook Wilmington a year later, they responded by ordering the wives and children of absent Loyalists out of the city.

Twenty-one women, all wives of Patriot leaders who had been expelled during the British occupation, protested the American retaliation. The women who were to be expelled had no friends nearby; they would have to travel to Charles Town (Charleston, South Carolina), and had no means of getting there. They had neither caused nor supported the expulsion of Patriot women. The petitioners argued that the men who had mistreated them deserved punishment, not these innocent women and children. Americans, they wrote, should “blush to imitate” the British “barbarity.”

WOMEN AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY

It was certainly unusual for women to organize in this way to protest a government’s actions, but 1782 was an unusual time. After years of hardship and sacrifice, these Patriot women believed that they deserved to have their opinions respected.

Anne Hooper, wife of William Hooper, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was first to sign the petition. The British had burned the Hoopers’ house outside Wilmington and shelled their estate in the country, and Anne had taken refuge with friends in town until the city fell to the British. She then fled with two of her children to her brother’s home in Hillsborough. Many Patriot leaders, especially signers of the Declaration of Independence, were singled out for retaliation by British troops, and their families suffered with them.

- What role, if any, did these women claim for themselves in politics?
- Why did they say they were taking an interest in this case?
- What did they ask of the Governor, and why?
- Why did they believe the Governor should listen to them?

Anne Hooper, Sarah Nash, Mary Nash, and others, to His excellency Gov. Alex Martin and the Members of the Honorable Council

We, the subscribers, inhabitants of the town of Wilmington, warmly attached to the State of North Carolina, and strenuously devoted to our best wishes and endeavours to the achievements of its independence, feeling for the honor of, and desirous that our Enemies should not have the smallest pretext to brand them as cruel or precipitate, that the dignity of our public characters may not be degraded to the imitation of examples of inhumanity of our Enemies,

Humbly shew to His Excellency, the Governor, and the honorable the council, that we have been informed that orders have issued from your honorable board that the wives and children of Absentees should depart the State with a small part of their property in forty eight hours after notice given them

It is not the province of our sex to reason deeply upon the policy of the order, but as it must affect the helpless and innocent, it wounds us with the most sincere distress and prompts our earnest supplication that the order may be arrested, and officers forbid to carry it into execution. If it is intended as retaliation for the expulsion of some of us, the subscribers, by the British from the Town of Wilmington, and to gratify a resentment which such inhumanity to us may be supposed to have excited, its object is greatly mistaken.

Those whom your proclamation holds forth as marks of public vengeance, neither prompted the British nor aided the execution of it. On the contrary, they expressed the greatest indignation at it, and with all their power strove to mitigate our sufferings. Still some instances attended which made the execution of it less distressing to us than yours must be to those upon whom it is intended to operate. We were ordered without the British Lines and then our friends were ready to receive us. They received us with a cordial welcome, and ministered to our wants with generosity and politeness. With pleasure we bear this public testimony. But our Town women now ordered out must be exposed to the extreme of human wretchedness. Their friends are in Charles Town; they have neither carriages nor horses to remove them by land, nor vessels to transport them by water, and the small pittance allotted them of their property, could they be procured, would be scarce equal to the purchase of them. It is beneath the character of the independent State of North Carolina to war with women and children. The authors of our ill treatment are the proper subjects of our own and the resentment of the public. Does their barbarity strike us with abhorrence? Let us blush to imitate it; not justify by our own practice what we so justly condemn in others. To Major Craig, and him alone, is to be imputed the inhuman edicts, for even the British Soldiers were shocked at it.

If we may be allowed to claim any merit with the public for our steady adherence to the Whig principles of America; if our sufferings induced by the attachment have given us favor and esteem with your honorable body, we beg leave to assure you that we shall hold it as a very signal mark of your respect for us if you will condescend to suffer to remain amongst us our old friends and acquaintances whose husbands, though estranged from us in political opinions, have left wives and children much endeared to us, and who may live to honor the State and to Society if permitted to continue here. The safety of this State, we trust in God, is now secured beyond the most powerful exertions of our Enemies, and it would be a system of abject weakness to fear the feeble efforts of women and children.

And as in Duty bound we shall ever pray.

Anne Hooper,

Ann Towkes,
Mary Allen,
M. Hand,
Sarah Nash,
S. Wilkings,
Mary Nash,
M. Lord,
Mary Moore,
Isabella Read,
E. Nash,
Sally Read,
Sarah Moore,
Mary Granger,
M. Loyd,
Jane Ward,
Catharine Young,
Hannah Ward,
J.M. Drayton,
Kitty Ward,
E. Wilkings,

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