

# The Committees of Safety

## As you read...

### TEMPORARY GOVERNMENTS

To put into force the trade boycott and other recommendations of the Continental Congress, various towns and counties established Committees of Safety. These committees, which consisted of local important men, became a kind of temporary government as royal authority began to crumble. They helped keep order during a time when royal government could not, and they helped to prepare people for the independent state governments that would be established in 1776.

Because the committees operated outside the law, though, they could take whatever powers they thought necessary to preserve the public “safety.” They decided what actions made a man “an enemy of his country,” judged people accused of wrongdoing, and handed out punishments — which militias or angry mobs might enforce.

The committees’ main goal was to maintain a united front against Britain. Citizens were asked to sign an “association” agreeing to the trade boycott or, later, to take an oath of loyalty to the new government. People who refused might themselves be boycotted, shamed, or bullied, but the goal was to force them to give in and support the resistance. Loyalists who sided with Britain remained loyal to the king, though, and in the end only war would settle the matter.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

The documents here are *minutes*, or records of meetings, of various committees of safety. As you read, ask yourself:

- What kinds of matters did the committees decide were their responsibility? Why did they consider these things important?
- Does it seem to have been clear to people what the committees thought they should or should not do?
- What means of enforcement do you see in these documents? Are there threats of violence? Is any violence implied?
- What do you imagine it would have been like to live at this time?

## Chowan County, January 28, 1775<sup>1</sup>

It being made appear<sup>2</sup> to the satisfaction of the committee for this county that we have violated the eighth Article of the Association entered into by the Continental Congress by being concerned in a horse race — We do therefore most heartily and sincerely declare and profess that we are sorry for our misconduct, and in order that proper atonement be make for such our enormity do promise that in future we shall strictly observe every article of the

Association and hope by such behaviour to be reinstated in the esteem and favour of our countrymen and acquaintance which we have justly forfeited by our misbehaviour.

WILLIAM ROBERTS,  
JOHN ELLIS,  
DEMSEY BOND.

• • •

**Wilmington, January 28, 1775<sup>3</sup>**

Resolved, that Balls and Dancing at Public Houses, are contrary to the Resolves of the General Congress.<sup>4</sup> It is the opinion of this Committee that every tavern Keeper in this town, have notice given them not to suffer any Balls or Public Dancing at their Houses as they wish to avoid the censure of the people.

Mr. W. Campbell, and Mr John McDonnell reported sundry dry goods imported by them in the Brigantine Carolina, Packet<sup>5</sup>, Malcom McNeil, Commander and delivered up their invoices to the committee, to have the said goods disposed of agreeable to the resolves of the General Congress.

Ordered, That the said Goods be advertized to be sold at public vendue, at 11 o'clock, on Monday, the 30th inst.

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**Wilmington, February 13, 1775<sup>6</sup>**

Information was made against Jona. Dunbilrie for taking four shillings per bushel, for salt, contrary to the resolves of this committee, he being sent for waited on the committee, confessed it was a mistake, and promised to return the money so exacted, which the committee were satisfied with.

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**Wilmington, March 1, 1775<sup>7</sup>**

The committee being informed of a Public Ball, to be given by sundry persons under the denomination of the gentlemen of Wilmington, at the house of Mrs. Austin, this evening, and as all public Balls and dances, are contrary to the resolves of the General Continental Congress, and a particular resolve of this committee: Ordered, That the following letter be

sent to Mrs. Austin, to forewarn her from suffering such Public Ball and dancing at her house.

Madam: The committee appointed to see the resolves of the Continental Congress put in execution, in this town, acquaint you, that the Ball intended to be given at your house, this evening, is contrary to the said resolves; we therefore warn you to decline it, and acquaint the parties concerned, that your house cannot be at their service, consistent with the good of your country.

Signed,  
By order of the Committee,  
THOS. CRAIKE.

. . .

**Chowan County, March 4, 1775<sup>8</sup>**

Forty Pounds Sterling be paid by the Chairman of the Committee to any person who shall, in eighteen months from the date hereof, first make in this Province, or cause to be therein made, under his direction, five hundred pair of Wool Cards... and five hundred pair of good Cotton Cards...<sup>9</sup> which the Committee hereby oblige themselves to purchase and pay, ready money, for... The quality and price that such Cards usually cost in Great Britain to be submitted to the Committee.

The Committee also offer a premium of Forty Pounds Sterling, to be paid by the Chairman of the Committee, to the person who shall first make for sale, in this Province, two thousand pounds of good Steel, fit for edged tools....

The Committee likewise offer a Premium of Ten Pounds, Proclamation Money<sup>10</sup>, to be paid by their Chairman, to any person who shall, within twelve months from this date, first produce one hundred yards of well fulfilled Woolen Cloth to the Committee, spun and wove in this County, and fulfilled in any County within the District of the Superiour Court of Edenton; and a Premium of Ten Pounds, like money, to be paid by the Chairman, to the person who shall, within twelve months from this date, first produce to the Committee one hundred yards of well bleached Linen...

. . .

**Wilmington, March 6, 1775<sup>11</sup>**

The following association was agreed on by the Committee, and annexed to the resolves of the General Congress, to be handed to every person in this county and recommended to the committees of the adjacent counties, that those who acceded to the said resolves, may subscribe their names thereto.

We the subscribers, in testimony of our sincere approbation of the proceedings of the late Continental Congress, to this annexed, have hereunto set our hands, and we do most solemnly engage by the most sacred ties of honor, virtue and love of our country, that we will ourselves strictly observe every part of the association recommended by the Continental Congress as the most probable means to bring about a reconciliation between Great Britain and her colonies and we will use every method in our power to endeavor to influence others to the observation of it by persuasion, and such other methods as shall be consistent with the peace and good order, and the laws of this Province, and we do hereby intend to express our utter detestation of all such as shall endeavor to defeat the purposes of the said Congress, and will concur to hold forth such characters to public contempt.

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### **Pitt County, March 10, 1775<sup>12</sup>**

This Committee being informed that Amos Atkinson, Solomon Shepperd and Jno Tison had in many instances obstructed the contribution for the Relief of the Poor of Boston &c.,

Ordered that the Chairman address said gentlemen so as they may appear at the next meeting of the Committee and Justifie themselves in that particular.

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### Notes

1. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr09-0357>.
2. Presumably they meant *apparent*.
3. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr09-0342>.
4. Why might the committee (and the Congress) discourage balls and public dancing?
5. Short for *packet-boat*, a ship that travels back and forth between two ports carrying mail.
6. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr09-0351>.
7. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr09-0359>.
8. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr09-0364>.
9. After sheep are sheared and the wool is cleaned, it must be *carded* so that all the fibers run the same way. After that, it can be spun into thread and then knitted or woven into cloth. To card wool by hand (the only way to do it in 1775), you place the raw tufts of wool between a pair of

*cards*, wooden paddles with wire faces, and brush the cards together. The process is the same for cotton, except that the cards have finer teeth since cotton fiber is more delicate than wool.

This video on YouTube (see <http://www.learnnc.org><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhQcadvDOoo>) shows a Moroccan woman carding wool. If you want to try it yourself, here are instructions (see <http://www.learnnc.org><http://www.joyofhandspinning.com/hand-carding.shtml>) from *The Joy of Handspinning*. In 1775, with imports from Britain cut off, wearing *homespun* — clothing made from fabric handmade in America — was a sign of patriotism. People buying “Made in America” today have it a little easier!

10. Paper money. See “The Value of Money in Colonial America.”
11. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr09-0369>.
12. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr09-0370>.