

JOHN FELL

Bergen County's Founding Patriot

By Eric Bal, First Mountain Chapter NJSSAR

John Fell has been described as the most important obscure personage of the Revolutionary War.

Even cursory review of his deeds, conduct and accomplishments during the founding of New Jersey and of the United States, set him apart as one of the brightest lights of freedom shining in Bergen County, New Jersey, and as one of the great leaders of that critical transformative period when the independence of the American States was defiantly declared and successfully taken by force of war, and a great federal republic established by the delegates of these new States.

At the outbreak of the Revolution John Fell was amongst the earliest patriots leading, in June 1774, even before the Declaration of Independence was issued, a huge crowd in the public square in Hackensack to declare affiliation with the patriot cause, feverishly gathering signatures on articles of association pledging allegiance with the patriotic cause.

John Fell quickly was recognized for his zeal for America's cause and was appointed to chair the important Standing Committee of Correspondence which was the beginning, the embryonic stage, of the movement to unite the colonies in their resistance.

When Bergen County delegates went to New Jersey's First Provincial Congress which met in Trenton in May, June and August of 1775, the delegation was headed by John Fell, who was also a member of the Council in New Jersey's first State Legislature in 1776 when it adopted New Jersey's first Constitution, which remained in effect until 1844.

John Fell was also appointed to lead Bergen County's Committee of Safety, which was the committee that made war in Bergen County. His power on such committee was enormous but his wielding of it was exercised humbly and with compassion but he nevertheless was so energetic and persistent in his attacks on the Tories in Bergen County that remained loyal to the British, that he was called "the great Tory Hunter". It was due, in large measure, to John Fell's great patriotic leadership that Bergen County did not fall into the exclusive control of the British. He was such a problem to the British forces that they sent a loyalist raiding party to his home (which still stands in what is now Allendale), on April 22nd 1777, to capture him. Such British focus on him reveals his importance to the Revolution.

After he was captured he was taken to the loyalist camp at Paulus Hook (in what is now downtown Jersey City) and interrogated by the loyalist commander, his former neighbor Colonel Van Buskirk, and then shipped off to the notoriously cruel Provost prison in New York City where he suffered harsh treatment over an extended period of time. Despite his harsh treatment he nevertheless tended to the needs of his fellow imprisoned

patriots¹, and kept a journal recording their names and treatment, providing, in some cases, the only recognition of their sacrifices.

New Jersey's Council of Safety made efforts to get John Fell released from his severe confinement by offering a prisoner exchange, but after the British rejected such offer, the Council, on November 17, 1777, ordered that two named prominent wealthy British loyalists be:

"forthwith committed to the Common Goal in Morristown until the Honorable John Fell, Esq. and Wynant Van Zandt are exchanged for them or released from their confinement in New York".²

The two prominent loyalists were finally released in February 1788 upon the release of John Fell.

After his release John Fell quickly was elected as a delegate to the Continental Congress, and re-elected twice more, where he served on the most important committees. He was on the committee that kept commerce going during the war, and was on the committee that dealt with foreign nations that the patriots needed to trade with to supply their lines and the population. He was ideally suited for such task, being both a lawyer and owning an armed shipping fleet that was engaged in foreign commerce before the war. His overseas contacts were invaluable.

While other members of the Continental Congress frequently made trips home to their families, John Fell rarely did, being a mainstay of the Congress' work. He voted on 265 resolutions and issues of the Congress, an astounding number. According to historian William Nelson John Fell "was frequently the guest of John Adams and other distinguished members of that body."³ John Fell's journal, which he kept during his service in the Continental Congress, tells us he frequently dined with John Jay who would later be one of the authors of the Federalist Papers, and go on to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. But, more importantly, his journal would record for posterity otherwise unobtainable detailed information about the Revolutionary War era.⁴

After the Revolutionary War was won and the Articles of Confederation proved inadequate to the needs of the confederation, the Constitutional Convention was held in Philadelphia from May until September during 1787. The proposed Constitution that emanated from that convention was sent to the States for ratification consideration. John

¹ Among other things he drew up last wills and testaments for his dying comrades.

² Documents Relating to the Revolutionary History of New Jersey, Volume 1, p. 455

³ New Jersey Biographical and Genealogical Notes From the Volumes of the New Jersey Archives, by William Nelson, Corresponding Secretary, New Jersey Historical Society, p. 111; being Volume 9 of The Collections of the New Jersey Historical Society

⁴ Delegate from New Jersey: The Journal of John Fell, Kennikat Press (1973)

Fell was elected as a delegate from Bergen County to New Jersey's ratification convention that was held at Trenton in December 1787, where he and the other delegates unanimously voted to ratify the Constitution of the United States.

John Fell is, by many measures, the most important Revolutionary War leader from Bergen County. The question that naturally arises is why so few people have previously heard of him and his indispensable contributions. Why has he been the most important obscure Revolutionary War leader?

The answer to this question lies in the marriages of his two children, Peter Renedaut Fell and Susan Fell. Both married into the loyalist Colden Family, Peter marrying Margaret Colden, and Susan marrying her sister-in-law Margaret Colden's brother Cadwallader Colden, Jr. While these spouses of John Fell's children were themselves not loyalists, their father, Cadwallader Colden, Sr., was an ardent loyalist who was imprisoned by the American army, and whose siblings married into top loyalist families such as the DeLancy family of New York City, and the Nicoll family, also of New York City. Undoubtedly the connections to these powerful loyalist families grew prior to the Revolution when John Fell himself was a wealthy and powerful shipping magnate whose business operations were based in New York City.

Cadwallader Colden Sr.'s brothers, who were not too old, and many of his nephews, were British officers during the Revolutionary War.

In deference to John Fell, his children's father-in-law was paroled and treated leniently, and, amazingly, Cadwallader Colden Sr.'s estate was exempted from forfeiture after the war. Such exemption reflects the great deference extended by the leaders of the Revolution to their indispensable leading fellow patriot, John Fell.

Circa 1793 John Fell, then being 72 years old, sold his estate in Bergen County, which was called Petersburg, and removed to Coldenham in Orange County, New York, to live with his children in his old age.

The intermarriage of John Fell's children with the Colden clan, however, prevented John Fell's grandchildren from being included in important positions in the new federal government, and obscured the family from mention in the newly written histories and revelries of the war being published at that time. And, as was the custom in those days, the news media imposed a blackout on post war news of marriages, births and deaths of loyalist families. All of John Fell's grandchildren were loyalist Colden family descendants. This blackout obscured his lineage for one or two generations, which is why many of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren remain generally unknown to this day.

However, many of John Fell's descendants have, through research, been identified. The genealogical chart which accompanies this short glimpse of the great John Fell shows many of his descendants, some newly discovered, as well as the intermarriages with the Colden family.