The Beginnings of National Politics

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A Note on Primary Sources

Modern scholarship on the Continental Congress has depended on two published collections of documents: Edmund C. Burnett, ed., Letters of Members of the Continental Congress (Washington, D.C., 1921–36), and Worthington C. Ford, et al., eds., Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789 (Washington, D.C., 1904–37). Both were important milestones in the development of American historical editing, yet their limitations have long been apparent. Burnett did not reprint some documents that had already been published, and in excerpting letters he often omitted passages he did not consider germane to the immediate proceedings of Congress but that frequently provided revealing evidence of the delegates’ political ideas and attitudes. Moreover, valuable additional materials continued to be discovered after Burnett completed his search of public archives and private holdings. Ford and his successors faced a similarly imposing task in presenting the official records of Congress. To supplement the terse entries in the daily journals, they reprinted a limited number of vital committee reports and motions that had been submitted to Congress; but these additions could hardly do justice to the massive collection of the Papers of the Continental Congress that are now on deposit at the National Archives. Although these records have been roughly indexed and microfilmed, they are organized in a way that has not encouraged their convenient use.

In conjunction with the Bicentennial, two major projects were accordingly launched to enhance our knowledge of the proceedings of Congress. The staff of the National Archives is completing a comprehensive index to the Papers of the Continental Congress that will facilitate the detailed reconstruction of many of its decisions. And a greatly expanded edition of the delegates’ correspondence and other papers is now being published under the auspices of the Library of Congress: Paul
A Note on Sources


Since this book was essentially completed before these projects issued their first publications, I can only look wistfully on the early results of their labors. Still, much of the most valuable material pertaining to Congress is already accessible in the printed and microfilmed editions of the papers of major Revolutionary leaders. Other important documents have been preserved in less prominent collections of personal papers and in those ever delightful (if also sometimes aggravating) autograph collections that contain everything from laundry receipts to sophisticated discussions of politics. There is an important advantage in relying on these biographical sources in addition to records organized around the proceedings of Congress, for the delegates' perceptions of issues and problems inevitably reflected their continuing experience at every level of politics as well as the information they received from correspondents at home, in the army, and in the state governments.

Anyone who undertakes serious archival research in Revolutionary history can only be staggered by the massive amount of material that has survived. Much of it will remain unpublished even after the major editorial projects now under way are completed. In the course of preparing this book, I have tried to read as widely in these sources as I possibly could and to use at least one major collection for each of the states. (Only Georgia, whose participation in national affairs was irregular, has been neglected.) The following description identifies only the most important and extensive of these sources. Other collections and publications, including contemporary pamphlets and newspaper essays that are discussed in the text, are cited in the Notes.

Among the papers of New England politicians, the most important are those of the "brace of Adamses": Samuel, who preserved too few of his own letters, and John, who I sometimes think wrote too many. Most of the extant letters written by the former are printed in Harry Alonzo Cushing, ed., The Writings of Samuel Adams (New York, 1904-08); others can be found (along with many John Adams letters) in Worthington C. Ford, ed., Warren-Adams Letters (Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, vols. LXXII-III [Boston, 1917-25]). But to reconstruct the wider range of his connections and activities, one has to turn to the Samuel Adams Papers, New York Public Library, which contain the letters he received from his numerous correspondents. For events in 1773-74, these should be supplemented by the Letters of the Boston Committee of Correspondence, in the same archive. The various letters, papers, and recollections of John Adams have long been a standard source for the history of the Continental Congress. Much of this material has already been published in L. H. Butterfield, et al., eds., Diary and Autobiography of John Adams (Cambridge, 1961), and Butterfield and
Marc Friedlaender, eds., *Adams Family Correspondence* (Cambridge, 1963–73). But his full political correspondence is only now coming into print with the long-awaited appearance of the first two volumes of Robert Taylor, *et al.*, eds., *Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge, 1977– ). Until this series is completed, historians will continue to rely on the Adams Family Papers (microfilm, Boston, 1954–59), especially Part IV, which includes the letters Adams received first as a delegate from 1774 to 1777 and then during his diplomatic career.

The Massachusetts Historical Society contains several important manuscript collections relevant to congressional politics. The Elbridge Gerry Papers and the Gerry-Russell Knight Collection cover the career of one of the longest-serving members of Congress. George Billias has recently deposited a microfilm copy of other Gerry letters he used in preparing his important biography of this major leader. Also useful were the Robert Treat Paine Papers for the 1770's and, for the 1780's, the respective papers of Samuel Holten, Henry Knox, and Theodore Sedgwick. Another collection of Samuel Holten Papers is in the Library of Congress. At the New-York Historical Society, the Samuel Osgood Papers and several sharply written letters by Stephen Higginson offer an important insight into the opposition to Robert Morris. Other valuable Higginson letters were printed in J. F. Jameson, ed., "Letters of Stephen Higginson, 1783–1804," American Historical Association, *Annual Report for the Year 1896*, I, 704–841.

However difficult they were to untangle, the affairs of Silas Deane had a major impact on congressional politics. Substantial materials on Deane have long been available in "Correspondence of Silas Deane, 1774–1776," *Collections* of the Connecticut Historical Society, vol. II (1870), and in Charles H. Isham, ed., *The Deane Papers* (*Collections* of the New-York Historical Society, vol. XIX–XXIII [New York, 1887–91]). But the Silas Deane Papers at the Connecticut Historical Society contain some unpublished material, including a lengthy manuscript history of the Revolution. At the same archive, the respective papers of Joseph Trumbull, Oliver Wolcott, Sr., William Samuel Johnson, and Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., were all useful. Much of the correspondence between Governor Trumbull and the Connecticut delegates is reprinted in *The Trumbull Papers* (*Collections* of the Massachusetts Historical Society, ser. 5, vols. IX–X, and ser. 7, vols. II–III [Boston, 1885–1902]).

For Rhode Island, a similarly valuable source is William R. Staples, *Rhode Island in the Continental Congress ...* (Providence, 1870), which reprints the delegates' entire official correspondence. For New Hampshire, I read the Meshech Weare Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society and a microfilm edition of the Josiah Bartlett Papers at the Dartmouth College Library. The latter collection has now been superseded by Frank Mevers, ed., *The Papers of Josiah Bartlett, 1729–1795*...
(microfilm, Concord, N.H., 1976). The Sturgis Family Papers at Houghton Library, Harvard University, include a number of letters of William Whipple.

Visitors to the old New York State Library at Albany who asked to see the extant papers of George Clinton were brought folders of charred documents, a distressing reminder of the fire of 1911. Fortunately, most of his official correspondence as wartime governor of New York had already been published in Hugh Hastings, et al., *Public Papers of George Clinton . . .* (New York and Albany, 1899–1914). All historians of Revolutionary and early national politics are familiar with Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke, eds., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1960–78), which has now reached an admirably prompt completion. Henry P. Johnston, ed., *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay* (New York, 1890–93), is being supplanted by Richard B. Morris, ed., *John Jay: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York, 1975– ). As a delegate, however, Jay was a very discreet correspondent; more informative sources for the ideas and politics of the New York delegation, often the most cohesive in Congress, are to be found in the James Duane and Robert R. Livingston Papers at the New-York Historical Society. Both collections provide evidence of the pressures that forced reluctant moderates to commit themselves to sustained political activity. The Duane Papers are an excellent source for the evolution of New York’s boundary policies, while the Livingston Papers have informative material on economic problems. At the same archive, the Alexander McDougall Papers are valuable both for the course of events in New York before independence and later for relations between Congress and the army. For the purposes of this study, the John Lamb Papers were disappointing. (All of these collections are available on microfilm.) The Gouverneur Morris Papers at Columbia University include revealing personal letters and drafts of several essays evincing the keen interest in problems of finance and supply that he shared with Hamilton and Robert Morris. The Abraham Yates, Jr., Papers at the New York Public Library contain both correspondence and polemical essays that trace the emergence of the rather different views of a staunch defender of the Articles of Confederation.

The New-York Historical Society also holds the Papers of Joseph Reed, a moderate who played a critical role in wartime politics as president of Pennsylvania. This position brought him into frequent political contact (and sometimes conflict) with Congress, and many of Reed’s letters express sharp comments on its policies. Some of these have been printed in William B. Reed, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed* (Philadelphia, 1847). Another candid commentator was William Livingston, the old whig, early member of Congress, and subsequently governor of New Jersey. I used the William Livingston Papers in the Massa-
A Note on Sources

A Note on Sources

By temperament and profession, Robert Morris was not given to writing lengthy discussions of politics. Some revealing letters can nevertheless be found in various collections at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and other archives. The microfilm edition of the Robert Morris Papers at the Library of Congress includes some personal correspondence as well as his official papers as superintendent of finance. Most of the latter will be published in E. James Ferguson, et al., eds., The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781–1784 (Pittsburgh, 1973–).

Thomas McKean, who represented Delaware in Congress during most of the period from 1774 to 1781, was one of the original Revolution-

chusetts Historical Society, other letters in the Henry Laurens Papers (described below), and the documents reprinted in New Jersey Revolutionary Correspondence (Newark, N.J., 1848), but the projected publication of a letterpress edition of his papers will be an important contribution to our knowledge of both state and national politics. Many of the logistical problems that troubled Reed and Livingston were, of course, also of critical concern to the army, as the publication of the later volumes of Richard K. Showman, et al., eds., The Papers of General Nathanael Greene (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1976–), will certainly illustrate in detail.

The extant correspondence of John Dickinson and Charles Thomson, two major Revolutionary leaders in Pennsylvania, is disappointingly thin, but the R. R. Logan Collection and the John Dickinson Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania contain several critical documents relating to the creation of a national government: Dickinson’s original draft of the Articles of Confederation, an unpublished revision of the New Jersey plan of 1787, and several characteristically thoughtful letters from Thomson. Other Thomson material is available in “The Thomson Papers, 1765–1816,” Collections of the New-York Historical Society, vol. XI (1878), and in the Charles Thomson Papers, Library of Congress. Far more imposing are the papers of Thomson’s friend, Benjamin Franklin. The most recent volumes of Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin (New Haven, 1959–), reprint important letters concerning resistance in the early 1770’s, but only with the recent publication of volume XXI has this series reached the critical year of 1774. Together with the new editions of the papers of John Adams and John Jay, the completion of this project will provide a valuable supplement to Francis Wharton, ed., Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States (Washington, D.C., 1889), a dated, though still useful, collection. These three works will also make accessible the detailed analyses of American politics that these diplomats received from domestic correspondents in the 1780’s. L. H. Butterfield, ed., Letters of Benjamin Rush (Princeton, 1951), contains a number of letters on national politics.

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A Note on Sources

aries, but the McKean Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania are disappointing. George H. Ryden, ed., Letters to and from Caesar Rodney, 1756–1784 (Philadelphia, 1933), and William T. Read, Life and Correspondence of George Read (Philadelphia, 1870), are somewhat more useful.

Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the wealthy Maryland moderate, was a particularly sensitive observer of American politics, and his correspondence includes excellent comments on the coming of independence, the creation of new governments, the distressing developments of 1776–77, foreign policy, confederation, and finance. The substantial Carroll holdings at the Maryland Historical Society have been reproduced in Thomas O’Brien Hanley, ed., The Charles Carroll Papers (microfilm, Wilmington, Del., 1972).

Had James Madison never lived, the Constitution would probably not have been written; had he not been so sensitive to the needs of history, we might still be groping to make sense of the 1780’s. The correspondence, memoranda, and notes of debates reprinted in William T. Hutchinson, William M. E. Rachal, and Robert Rutland, eds., The Papers of James Madison (Chicago, 1962– ), are simply indispensable. They overshadow even that other monument to Revolutionary Virginia, Julian P. Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (Princeton, 1950– ). Both collections reprint an extensive amount of correspondence concerning the deliberations of Congress. Robert Rutland, ed., The Papers of George Mason, 1725–1792 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1970), traces the progress of an elitist but locally oriented politician who became a major critic of Congress in the early 1780’s and later a prominent anti-Federalist. Richard Henry Lee and Arthur Lee were two of the most influential early leaders of colonial resistance and, in the 1780’s, two of the most committed opponents of additional powers for Congress. James C. Ballagh, ed., The Letters of Richard Henry Lee (New York, 191–14), reprints most of his surviving letters; Richard H. Lee, The Life of Arthur Lee, LL.D. (Boston, 1829), is less reliable. Both works have to be used in conjunction with Paul P. Hoffman, ed., Lee Family Papers, 1742–1795 (microfilm, Charlottesville, Va., 1966), which is critical for the events leading to independence, factional disputes within Congress in the late 1770’s, and the reverberations these conflicts continued to have into the 1780’s.

The official correspondence of the North Carolina delegates and a large number of important private letters are reprinted in William L. Saunders, ed., Colonial Records of North Carolina (Raleigh, N.C., 1886–95), and in Walter Clark, ed., State Records of North Carolina (Winston, Goldsboro, and Raleigh, N.C., 1895–1906). Much of the material in the Thomas Burke Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, can be found in this series, but the Burke Papers (which are available on microfilm) contain some fascinating personal letters that
A Note on Sources

remain unprinted. Also useful for North Carolina is Don Higginbotham, ed., The Papers of James Iredell (Raleigh, N.C., 1976–).

Next to John Adams, Henry Laurens of South Carolina was perhaps the most prolific correspondent ever to sit in Congress. His letter books and loose papers are the single most important source for congressional politics in 1777 and 1778. Most of the extant Laurens papers are available in Philip Hamer, ed., The Papers of Henry Laurens in the South Carolina Historical Society (microfilm, Charleston, S.C., 1966). Despite his early participation in resistance, the surviving papers of Christopher Gadsden proved disappointing; but there are several important letters in Richard Walsh, ed., The Writings of Christopher Gadsden, 1746–1805 (Columbia, S.C., 1966).

Finally, it would be appropriate to mention the major autograph collections that I used. The best of these is, of course, the massive Gratz Collection at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The same archive also has the Connaroe, Dreer, and Etting collections. The Fogg Collection at the Maine Historical Society and the Charles Roberts Collection at Haverford College are excellent. Less useful are the Frederick Dearborn Collection at Houghton Library, Harvard University, and the Emmet Collection at the New York Public Library.