

Hewes, Joseph ^[1]

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by Michael G. Martin, Jr., 1988

23 Jan. 1730–10 Nov. 1779



"Joseph Hewes." N.C. Highway Historical Marker A-4, N.C. Office of Archives & History.

^[2]Joseph Hewes, merchant, colonial leader, delegate to the [Continental Congress](#) ^[3], and signer of the [Declaration of Independence](#) ^[4], was raised at Mayberry Hill, the family's 400-acre plantation near Kingston, West Jersey. He was the oldest son of Aaron (1700–53) and Providence Worth Hewes.

Young Hewes inherited many traditions that would serve him well throughout life. The more important of these were a love of the land, a belief in the duty of public service, and a firm indoctrination in the "Puritan Ethic" of diligence, hard work, and thrift as the prerequisites for success. The influence of these values can be seen in his decision to renounce his intention to enter the College of New Jersey (later [Princeton](#) ^[5]). Following his classical education at the Kingston Friends' Grammar School in 1749 and attracted by Philadelphia's opportunities for a mercantile career, Hewes apprenticed himself to Joseph Ogden, a relative and successful merchant-importer in that city. From August 1749 to September 1754, Hewes learned the trading business from dock laborer to cargo master. In the latter year he turned down a partnership offered by Ogden and, aided by funds from his father's estate, established his own retail concern. Discouraged by the lack of progress, he soon began to search for a more opportune site to relocate his business. His choice was [Edenton](#) ^[6], N.C.

Hewes arrived in Edenton in early 1755. In the spring, he entered into partnership with George Blair and Charles Worth Blount, both prominent merchants. The firm of Blount, Hewes and Company prospered, and by 1757 Hewes found time for political and civic affairs. That year he was appointed a justice of the peace for [Chowan County](#) ^[7] and inspector for the Port of Roanoke. He also became an early leader in the movement to establish an academy in Edenton, a member of the building committees for the county courthouse and jail, and an official of [St. Paul's Parish](#) ^[8].

By 1760 Hewes had gained a position among the elite of Edenton society. No doubt his status was enhanced by his engagement late in that year to Isabella Johnston, the younger sister of Edenton lawyer and political leader [Samuel Johnston](#) ^[9]. Although Isabella's death within the year brought this relationship to a tragic end, Johnston continued to consider Hewes as a member of his family. In 1760, Johnston, who had served as Edenton's representative in the Assembly since 1754, convinced Hewes to stand for the borough seat. Thus began the merchant's career in politics that would run with few interruptions until his death about twenty years later.

Hewes's business ability was early recognized by his fellow representatives, and he was repeatedly appointed to appropriation and finance committees. In filling these and other committee posts, he became intimately involved in the often bitter legislative-executive contests over the power to originate appropriation bills, to audit accounts of public expenditures, to issue paper currency, to collect and appropriate [quitrent](#) ^[10] revenue, to determine the [Assembly](#) ^[11] quorum, to appoint and instruct the provincial treasurers and agents, and to structure the colony's judicial system.

Although his service to the colony was exhaustive, Hewes did not neglect the interests of his constituents. From 1760 to 1774 he sponsored local bills to finance construction of a courthouse, church, and academy; to reorganize the town's court and tax system; to improve navigational aids in the Albemarle Sound and Edenton Bay; and to regulate the inspection of exports through the Port of Roanoke.

As the movements towards increased intercolonial cooperation and colonial independence from Britain gathered momentum during the early 1770s, Hewes assumed a place among the Whig ^[12] leadership of the colony. On 4 Dec. 1773, the North Carolina Assembly in response to a Virginia resolution created a "Committee of Correspondence." The committee consisted of Hewes, Speaker of the House John Harvey, Jr., Robert Howe ^[13], Cornelius Harnett ^[14], William Hooper, Richard Caswell ^[15], Edward Vail, John Ashe ^[16], and Samuel Johnston. These men would become the "revolutionary high command" of the colony. In the spring of 1774, the committee approved a Massachusetts circular proposing that an intercolonial congress be convened in Philadelphia to formalize opposition to "British tyranny." Forced to meet in extralegal session due to Governor Josiah Martin's ^[17] refusal to convene a regular meeting, members of the Assembly met in New Bern on 25 August, approved Hewes's report of the Committee of Correspondence, and on 27 August selected Hewes, Caswell, and Hooper as the colony's delegates to the Continental Congress ^[18].

Hewes and Hooper arrived in Philadelphia on 14 September. Soon after taking his seat Hewes became acutely aware of the lack of unity among the delegates. On one extreme were the advocates of an uncompromising defense—by force if necessary—of American rights, led by the representatives of Massachusetts, Virginia, and South Carolina. The opposition, led by the representatives of Pennsylvania and New York, argued for reconciliation with the Crown and were willing to recognize a wide latitude of Parliamentary authority over colonial affairs. The majority of the delegates, including those of North Carolina, found themselves somewhere between the two extremes. These moderate Whigs favored reconciliation with Britain, but they also stressed the need for guarantees against further infringements on American liberty. In succeeding weeks the moderates were able to control the tone of the debates and the actions of the Congress. After it adjourned on 26 Oct. 1774, Hewes remained in Philadelphia to renew old friendships and visit relatives. He also traveled to New York on business.

In late November, he returned to Edenton suffering from an "intermittent fever and ague." In all probability Hewes had malaria ^[19], a disease common in Edenton due to the mosquito-infested swamps surrounding the town. His health also had deteriorated under the effects of the cold weather and heavy work load in Philadelphia. However, his activities in North Carolina from November 1774 to April 1775 allowed little time for rest and recuperation. His mercantile firm, which had been reorganized with Robert Smith as "Hewes and Smith," was valued at £20,000 in 1774; in addition, Hewes owned a shipyard on the bay south of Edenton. While attending to business affairs, he also served on Edenton's Committee of Safety, which was responsible for enforcing the Continental Association in the Port of Roanoke.

By early 1775, the work of the moderate Whigs throughout the colonies for peaceful reconciliation with Britain had suffered massive setbacks. The failure of the Crown to consider the Declaration of Rights and Grievances ^[20], Parliament's rejection of the conciliatory proposals of Lords North and Chatham, the declaration that a "state of rebellion" existed in Massachusetts, and the ordering of 10,000 additional troops to Boston provided evidence that George III had chosen force to answer colonial complaints. This somber realization was pressed home in late April when news of the battles of Lexington and Concord reached Hewes and the other delegates as they prepared to return to Philadelphia.

When the Continental Congress reconvened, Hewes began to urge North Carolina to strengthen its defenses. To counter Governor Martin ^[17]'s efforts among the colony's Loyalists ^[21], Hewes enlisted the aid of Presbyterian ^[22] ministers in Philadelphia. First, a pamphlet was written for distribution to Highland Scot ^[23] immigrants explaining the work of the Continental Congress. In November 1775, two of the ministers traveled south—with instructions drafted by Hewes—to further stem the tide of Loyalism in North Carolina.

Because of failing health and in order to attend the colony's Third Provincial Congress ^[24], Hewes left Philadelphia six days before the 1 August adjournment of the Continental Congress. His stay in North Carolina, though brief, was marked by participation in the organization of a provincial government for the colony and in the authorization to raise the colony's quota of Continental troops. On 22 October he rejoined his fellow delegates in Philadelphia. Among his committee assignments during this session, his service on the Naval Board proved to be the most exhaustive and most significant. From November 1775 to February 1776, he served as the board's secretary, keeping its business records and conducting much of its voluminous correspondence. Possibly one of Hewes's most noteworthy achievements on the board was to secure John Paul Jones's ^[25] first commission in the Continental Navy ^[25].

In 1776, King George III ^[26] not only rejected the Olive Branch Petition ^[26], but also proclaimed the colonies to be in a state of rebellion. This was closely followed by the Congress's authorization for independent governments in each colony. In January 1776 Thomas Paine's incendiary *Common Sense* appeared, and, against Hewes's urgings, was sent to North Carolina for distribution. The following month, Governor Martin's efforts among the Loyalists reached fruition only to be thwarted by patriots at the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge ^[27]. The final blow to moderate hopes came in March with news of the Crown's prohibitory Act closing colonial ports and placing the colonies under military rule. Hewes stated that "nothing is left now but to fight it out." All hope of reconciliation had vanished and separation from England was now formally debated in the Continental Congress. Hewes's pleas for instructions from North Carolina on the issue of independence were answered on 12 April by the Fourth Provincial Congress meeting at Halifax ^[28]. The colony's delegates were told "to concur with the delegates of the other colonies in declaring Independency." On 7 June Virginia's Richard Henry Lee introduced the long-awaited resolution, which was approved in final form on 4 July 1776.

Some historians have stated that Joseph Hewes was openly indecisive on the issue of declaring independence from

Britain. The basis for this assertion lies in John Adams's letter to William Plummer dated 28 Mar. 1813. But records of the Continental Congress, specifically those covering the period from March to July 1776, provide no support for Adams's recollection. Rather, these records, coupled with the writings of other delegates, show Adams to be in error. It has been argued that Adams in his letter to Plummer was recalling the actions of South Carolina's Edward Rutledge ^[29] rather than those of Hewes. Whatever the nature of Adams's confusion may have been, Hewes's attitude from March to July 1776 is clear from his correspondence—he supported independence. This decision was made reluctantly, but once made, there was no infirmity of will or allegiance. In March 1776, Hewes became a revolutionary—albeit a reluctant one—but a revolutionary just the same.

Early in August 1776, Hewes left Philadelphia for a much-needed "recess from Publick Employment." For almost a year he had been at work in that city and, from March through July, he had carried the entire work load of the North Carolina delegation alone. His health, already poor, by August had deteriorated to a dangerous degree. He complained of continual headaches, high fevers, and fading vision.

His hoped-for rest had to be postponed, for shortly after returning to Edenton he was elected the borough's representative to the Fifth Provincial Congress. The main concern of this Congress, which met in Halifax during November–December 1776, was the drafting of a state constitution. This proved to be a most divisive process. The "Conservatives," led by Samuel Johnston, James Iredell ^[30], and Hewes, supported a political system based on a strong executive and property qualifications for suffrage and officeholding. In vehement opposition were the "Radicals," led by Willie Jones ^[31] and Thomas Person, who argued for the establishment of a "direct democracy." The constitution, as adopted on 14 December, improved the political position of the lower classes, but far from satisfied either faction. The debates over the document did produce one unfortunate result—an embittered and continuing division in the ranks of North Carolina Whigs.

Following the adjournment of the Provincial Congress, Hewes was able to rest in Edenton for a few months. Late in March 1777, his health had improved to the extent that he was planning to return to Philadelphia and the Continental Congress. That the state's General Assembly would fail to appoint him was never considered. However, when the Assembly convened on 7 April, the previous Conservative-Radical factionalism reappeared in all its bitterness, and the major point of contention became the reappointment of Joseph Hewes as delegate to the Continental Congress. Led by John Penn ^[32], the Radicals accused Hewes of plural office-holding, a violation under the new state constitution, and of reaping personal profit from his position as delegate. After many days of emotional debate, Hewes was bypassed and Penn was appointed as delegate. Although this defeat was a harsh one for Hewes, a more significant result may have been the withdrawal of many Conservatives, notably William Hooper ^[33], from politics.

Feeling that his reputation had been unjustly smeared, Hewes retired from public life, refusing in both 1777 and 1778 to stand for Edenton's seat in the General Assembly ^[11]. For two years he devoted his attention to regaining his health and supervising his extensive business affairs. Early in 1779, however, he acceded to popular demand and returned to the General Assembly. Soon after taking his seat, he allowed his name to be placed in nomination as a delegate to the Continental Congress. This time his election was not contested.

Soon after his arrival in Philadelphia, Hewes was appointed to the Treasury and Marine committees, two of the Congress's most important and busiest standing committees. Within a month, he received two additional assignments. By the middle of August 1779, Hewes wrote that he again suffered from severe headaches and by late September he was so ill that he could not walk to Carpenter's Hall. On 29 October, sensing that he could no longer fulfill his duties as delegate, Hewes submitted his resignation. Unable to travel, he remained in Philadelphia hoping that complete rest would restore his strength. However, his health was beyond repair and he died about two weeks later at age forty-nine.

When news of Hewes's passing reached the Continental Congress, the delegates voted to attend the funeral as a body and proclaimed a one-month period of mourning. At 3:00 P.M. on 11 November, a most distinguished gathering met at Hewes's rooming house and escorted the body to Christ's Church for burial. The Pennsylvania Packet ^[34], in its 16 November obituary, paid a deserved tribute to Joseph Hewes and to the devotion to duty which his life exemplified: "His mind was constantly employed in the business of his exalted station until his health, much impaired by intense application, sunk beneath it."

The only known likeness of Hewes is a 1 3/4-inch by 1 5/8-inch miniature painted on ivory by Charles Willson Peale in 1776. The oval portrait was framed as a lady's brooch and was a gift from Hewes to Helen Blair, the niece of Isabella Johnston. The miniature is now owned by the U.S. Naval Academy Museum ^[35] in Annapolis, Md.

References:

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Additional Resources:

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