

## CONNECTICUT ON THE EVE OF RATIFICATION

by Mark Williams

The people of Connecticut were, as much as the people of any state, intensely proud of the “new order” that had been won in the years of the Revolution. At the conclusion of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, they, like Americans all over the thirteen former colonies (except the loyalists), betrayed a nationalist fervor in their celebrations. However, they were far from nationalists, most of them. That is, just because they were proud of their nation, they did not necessarily believe in a strong national government, or think of themselves as having a great deal in common with people from other states. Furthermore, there were deep issues that divided them within their own state, and the divisions over these issues would shape the division over the Constitution.

### THE COMMUTATION CONTROVERSY

Serving in the Continental Army was no picnic. Most Connecticut veterans of the Revolutionary War were proud of their service, and yet, while the war raged, many Connecticut men practiced draft evasion. Towns had quotas to fill for the Continental line, but few managed to meet them. Instead, they protested that they preferred to form their own militia companies, with officers elected by the men themselves, and to stay put until their part of the country was threatened. Unfortunately for Washington and his efforts to remain a surviving “fox,” if seldom a predator, the experience of Concord and the siege of Boston had led people to believe the war could be successfully fought on that pattern. Also the experience of the disaster at New York in the summer of 1776 had convinced many that it was best not to go too far from home.

In an effort to deal with this aversion to winter campouts in backwoods Pennsylvania, and to do something about Washington’s increasingly angry correspondence, Congress, in 1778, promised seven years half pay after the war to officers in the Continental Army. In 1780, with officers dropping out all along the seaboard as the British seemed on the verge of winning, Congress extended the benefit to half pay for life.

Since this benefit was not given, for obvious reasons of cost, to enlisted men, there was always a good deal of bitterness about it. Nevertheless, Congress again bowed to the wishes of officers in 1783 and “commuted” the benefit to full pay for five years. Despite of the fact that one of Connecticut’s Congressmen, Eliphalet Dyer of Windham, had cast the deciding vote in favor, Connecticut was in an uproar over the measure.

Opponents, who used the issue to secure victories in the state election (Governor Jonathan Trumbull, Connecticut’s War Governor of 18 years, decided to retire the following year, and Dyer lost his place on the Council), were afraid that this was the beginning of Congress becoming as powerful as Parliament had claimed to have been. At a series of special ad hoc conventions in Middletown in 1783, delegates mainly from rural towns in the north and west of Connecticut, many of whom were former militia officers and members of the General Assembly, passed resolves championing states rights, opposing commutation, decrying the need to spend a lot of money on ambassadors to foreign countries, and

condemning the elitist Society of Cincinnati (an organization of former Continental Army officers led in Connecticut by Col. David Humphreys).

The supporters of commutation tended to be former Continental officers, obviously, and merchants who had shares of the national debt. Thus, the lines began to be drawn between an agrarian group, which favored a weak central government and was suspicious that attempts were being made to create a new aristocracy, and a merchant-nationalist coalition, which looked to Congress for solution to the problems it perceived.

#### IMPORT DUTIES

In a similar fashion, the two groups polarized on the issue of the taxation powers of the national government. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the national government needed funds. How much and how they were to be obtained was another matter. An amendment to the Articles of Confederation, giving Congress power to impose import duties, failed to pass because one state (Rhode Island) opposed it. As a compromise proposal, in 1784, Congress asked the states for fifteen years of exclusive regulation of commerce and a 5% impost. Supporters in Connecticut, particularly merchants in Fairfield County, were quick to support the proposal, noting that individual state regulation of commerce had led to a disastrous balance of payments problem with New York State. In spite of the recent fate of other nationalists in state elections, the Governor and Council also came out in favor of the idea.

Again the agrarians protested - they weren't in the least interested in paying higher prices for the products they imported. Led by James Wadsworth of Durham, a militia officer, they voiced suspicion of greater concentration of power in the national government. They also suspected, possibly quite correctly, that the whole effort to pass an import tax was connected to the effort to give the Continental officers special privileges, thus creating an aristocracy at the expense of many others who had also fought (on occasion) for Liberty. However, they were willing to compromise on a plan that would grant the impost for three years in order to reduce the national debt. Nothing ever came of this, because the whole thing met with even more opposition in other states.

#### THE ECONOMY AND THE FARMERS' PLIGHT

While Connecticut did not really experience an intense rural depression, as occurred in some other states, the farmers could well see that they were lagging behind other elements in the state. Connecticut merchants, frustrated as they were with the convoluted and inflation-ridden currency situation after the war, were really doing very well. Some, like Silas Deane of Wethersfield and Jeremiah Wadsworth of Hartford, had become enormously wealthy during the war, engaging in (of all things) the arms trade. They supplied the Continental Army with a large portion of the arms that could be gotten only from foreign merchants. In the process, they had made sure to allow themselves a healthy commission for the risks they took. And, as usual, the "trickle down" process never worked the way the merchants said it would. The contrast between the growing wealth of these and other merchants and the ordinary farmers of Connecticut did not go unnoticed.

While farmers were mumbling about uneven distribution of the goodies, they were still paying taxes. During the war the state taxes had been high, and were compounded by such staggering inflation that some towns petitioned the Assembly that they might have to give state tax collectors the same treatment British customs and stamp agents had once been accorded. Uninterested in giving tar and feathers a try, the Assembly passed some tax relief and restructuring measures after the war. Still, everyone had to pay an equal poll tax, and for many self-sufficient, cash-poor farmers, that alone was too much.

Just the same, because of the tax-relief measures and the reassurance they offered to Connecticut farmers, the situation never developed into a Shays' Rebellion. There were some plots in Sharon and Preston in 1786 to support the Shaysites, but apparently Connecticut stayed calm enough for the Governor to issue a proclamation offering a reward for Shays' and his followers' capture. Cincinnati Society boss David Humphreys of Derby raised a regiment with the Governor's blessing to help suppress the Massachusetts rebellion. Among the established political order, Shays' Rebellion incited some real fear.

The mumbblings and mutterings did not amount to much this time, but the lines between the farmers and the nationalist-merchants were still clear.

#### THE WESTERN RESERVE AND RELIGION

One other issue that kept these two groups antagonistic toward each other was the matter of disposing western lands. Some of Connecticut's old "sea-to-sea" claim had been ceded to Pennsylvania by 1786, but the state still retained title to a sizable tract south of Lake Erie to use to pay State Militiamen. The conflict that emerged over the Western Reserve concerned the question of whether to sell large lots or small lots. As might be expected, the agrarian dominated Assembly favored sale of small lots that ordinary farmers could afford. Others wanted the state to auction off large parcels and be done with the matter (leaving it to the real estate brokers). Finally, a compromise was reached on both price and minimum acreage, but not after more aggravation of the political rift. Western lands had been the cause of political division in the state before the Revolution, but the division then had been more between geographic regions than between economic classes. A large group of people in eastern Connecticut had supported the promoting of settlement in western Pennsylvania before the Revolution, but they met with a lot of opposition from residents of western Connecticut.

Another pre-Revolution issue that lurked in the background at this time was the problem of religion. Connecticut had been founded as a Puritan Commonwealth in which the state supported one church with everyone's tax money; but during the 18th Century there was a good deal of dissension among Puritans. The Great Awakening had splintered the colony into New Lights and Old Lights, as well as offering an opportunity for Anglicans, Baptists, and Methodists to find a place in society.

The colonial government, independent though it was from British control, had been reluctant to move away from the established "presbyterian" church structure and doctrine. Only intense pressure had resulted in increased toleration of different sects under the "certificate" laws. With the exception of the Anglicans, though, the clergy had generally united behind the Revolution, and by 1783, the New Light-

Old Light factionalism had lost much of its heat in the political arena. Nevertheless, people who had grown up in an atmosphere of protest about local autonomy in religious matters were clearly influenced by those times. Particularly communities that had moved in the direction of New Light doctrine, which argued that individual congregations, not county supervision “associations,” should control their own practices and beliefs, tended to be suspicious of ideas about a strong central government.

#### THE RATIFICATION CONVENTION APPROACHES

The lines were clear as the General Assembly debated whether to respond to the call for a Constitutional Convention in May of 1787. The rural interest feared the state government would not send delegates “close to the people’s hearts,” and that the liberties of the people were in danger. The three chosen, Oliver Ellsworth of Windsor, Roger Sherman of New Haven, who had signed the Declaration of Independence, and William Samuel Johnson of Stratford, were not intense nationalists, but certainly became so on their return. At Philadelphia they engineered a compromise on the national legislature that had been responsible for the Constitution coming into existence. Now they made every effort, in print and in person, to see to it that their handiwork was ratified.

Their task seemed nearly impossible at first. Not only was there great suspicion among the rural interest about what had been done at Philadelphia, but the rural interest was more numerous than ever. In a fit of independence seeking, over twenty new towns had split off from “mother” towns since the Revolution. The Council had made an effort to keep the influence of these fiercely independent “outlanders” to a minimum by allowing the new towns only one seat (as opposed to the normal two) in the Assembly. Nevertheless, there were more votes for the agrarians, and the legislature decided to allow each town the same number of delegates at the Ratification Convention as it had representatives in the Assembly.

The merchant-nationalist coalition had its work cut out for it in a deeply divided state. Old issues would now become part of the debate over the new Constitution, old lines would form again, old suspicions would be kindled anew, and “reason” would be hard-pressed to win the day. Nevertheless, those supporting the new Constitution were undaunted in their determination to establish their new order and secure the safety of the nation. Those who opposed them were equally intent on securing that nation’s safety, but saw entirely different threats.