

FREEDOM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

28 Old Portland Road
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e-Newsletter

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Revolutionary New Hampshire - A Place In History

From Crown to Consent: Commemorating 250 Years of New
Hampshire's First Constitution

by Ashley Miller, NH State Archivist

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Two hundred and Fifty years ago, on January 5, 1776, the people of New Hampshire took a step that forever changed the course of American history. In the midst of uncertainty, conflict, and revolution, they did something extraordinary: they created their own constitution. In doing so, New Hampshire became the first colony to establish a government independent of British Rule. This bold and deliberate act was not only a response to crisis, it was a declaration of principle, a commitment to self-government, and a powerful statement of faith in the people.

By the latter end of 1775, New Hampshire's colonial government had effectively collapsed. Royal Governor John Wentworth, a loyal servant of the Crown, ad worked to maintain British Authority in the colony, even as public resistance grew stronger. His enforcement of unpopular royal policies, including those that led to the Pine Tree Riot, combined with his increasing reliance on British military power to suppress dissent, alienated New Hampshire residents. Events such as the raids on Fort William and Mary made it unmistakably clear that the governor no long held the confidence-or the conset of the governed.

As tensions escalated, Wentworth dissolved the colonial assembly, and in June 1775, fled New Hampshire to seek protection from the British military. His departure left the colony without any recognized civil authority. Courts could not function. Laws could not be enforced. Everyday governance ground to a halt. At a time when stability was desperately needed, New Hampshire found itself without a government at all.

Yet rather than descend into chaos, the people of New Hampshire acted with remarkable resolve. Through the Provincial Congress, an assembly chosen by towns across the colony, leaders gathered to confront an urgent question: how could order, justice, and liberty be preserved without a king or royal governor? Their answer was revolutionary in both spirit and structure.

On January 5, 1776, the Provincial Congress adopted a constitution that placed governing power firmly in the hands of the people. It created an elected legislature and an executive council, chosen not by royal appointment but by popular consent. Authority flowed upward from the towns and their representatives, not downward from the crown. This was governance by choice, not by decree.

Although this constitution was intended as a temporary measure, a practical solution for extraordinary times, it embodied enduring principles. It affirmed the right of the people to govern themselves. It recognized representation as the foundation of legitimate authority. And it demonstrated that stable government could exist without monarchy or hereditary power. The first constitution remained in effect throughout the Revolutionary War and until New Hampshire adopted a permanent constitution in 1784. During those crucial years, it provided continuity, legitimacy, and a mode of self-rule at a moment when the future of American independence was far from certain.

New Hampshire's action did not occur in isolation. News of this constitution spread beyond its borders, offering both inspiration and proof to other colonies that independence was not merely an abstract ideal, but a workable reality. Six months later, the Continental Congress would adopt the Declaration of Independence, but New Hampshire had already shown what independence could look like in practice.

As we commemorate this 250th anniversary, we honor more than a document. We honor the courage of ordinary people, farmers, merchants, artisans, and town leaders who understood that liberty requires responsibility, participation, and the rule of law. They did not wait for permission to govern themselves. They stepped forward, trusted one another, and built a government grounded in consent.

The legacy of New Hampshire's first constitution lives on today in our democratic institutions and in the belief that government exists to serve the people. Two and a half centuries later, we continue to benefit from their foresight, their pragmatism, and their unwavering commitment to self-rule.

On January 5, 1775, New Hampshire did more than respond to a political crisis. It helped light the path toward American Independence, and for that, its place in history is secure.

BENJAMIN THOMPSON 1753-1814



Our monthly series shares the stories, both ordinary and extraordinary, of New Hampshire's role in the fight for American independence. This research was completed by the FHS Collections Coordinator, Moira Epps.

Benjamin Thompson was a scientist, inventor, teacher, soldier, and British spy. He married into the prominent Walker family of Concord, New Hampshire in 1772, which raised his social status and enabled him to move in influential circles. When war broke out, Thompson sided with the British, even though the Walkers were patriots. In December 1774, Thompson heard there were plans to tar and feather him, so he borrowed a horse from his father-in-law and fled south to the British forces stationed in Boston. He never returned to New Hampshire or saw his wife, Sarah, again.

After fleeing New Hampshire, Thompson settled temporarily in Woburn, Massachusetts, where he had been born. Suspicion followed him there, and he was questioned by the Woburn Committee of Correspondence. He managed to convince them of his support for the patriot cause, but in truth, Thompson was a British spy. From Woburn, 10 miles outside of Boston, he sent information about American troop movements to his contacts in the British Army. Thompson's scientific background came in handy during his short career as a spy. He disguised his reports with secret ink comprised of tannic acid made from nutgalls, which grew in oak trees around Woburn. The ink was made legible by a treatment based on the chemical ferrous sulphate. A letter Thompson sent to the British in May 1775 is the earliest known instance of the use of secret ink in the American Revolution.

Thompson evacuated Boston with the British forces in March 1776 and eventually became a British officer. After the war, Thompson lived in Europe, where he developed new types of lamps, stoves, and fireplaces, and pioneered the idea of the soup kitchen. For his achievements, Thompson was ennobled as a count of the Holy Roman Empire in 1791, choosing for his name "Rumford," which was the original name of Concord. Hence, he became Count Rumford.

Our upcoming guest speaker series
Wednesday, April 15, 7pm
Freedom Town Hall

The Freedom Historical Society continues its celebration of the 250th Anniversary on Wednesday, April 15 at 7 PM at the Freedom Town Hall with the program **Redcoats & Rebels: New Hampshire and the American Revolution**. Presenter Mary Adams from the NH Historical Society will share her expertise on the New Hampshire Revolutionary Story with a Q & A to follow.

Few people know that Paul Revere's first ride was to Portsmouth, NH in December 1774 to warn the patriots that the British were coming to reinforce Fort William and Mary. This was five months before the Redcoats marched on Concord and Lexington. Nor do they know that two-thirds of the troops at the Battle of Bunker Hill were from New Hampshire. Most people are also unaware that New Hampshire's Provincial Congress adopted the first state constitution in January 1776, making no mention of royal authority and essentially declaring independence from Great Britain six months before anyone else. You will not want to miss this program event.

Have you logged on to see our online collection?

You can see our collection of items, articles, and photos without leaving home! Log on to www.freedomhistoricalsociety.org, and click on the link on the front page under "What's happening?" Once you are in, be sure to click on "Random Images", a trip down memory lane!!



Glad Works was a prominent member of Freedom. She was a Co-founder of the Freedom Historical Society and Museum

Memorial and Tribute Gifts

The FHS Memorial Gift and Tribute Program is a meaningful and lasting way to honor friends and family while helping the Freedom Historical Society. Tribute gifts to the Freedom Historical Society in 2025 and 2026 recognize the following special family and friends who loved preserving the history of Freedom.

Elizabeth McNaughton Acton
Dick Birnie
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Bill Elliott
Albert and Betty Godfrey

John and Lillian Godrey
Marshall Kendall
Edith Gardner Lakin
Mary Littlefiled
Bob and Eleanor MacCarthy
Sally and Bill Stoops
Henry and Margaret Trail

Send your Tribute Gift to Freedom Historical Society, PO Box 548, Freedom NH 03836

Thank You

We love Freedom, NH, and we've been preserving it's history since 1965 and sharing it's stories.

The Freedom Historical Society serves the Freedom community from children to seniors each year through our museum, programs, websites, exhibits, and publications. The FHS is an independent, nonprofit, member-supported organization. Our work to save, preserve, and share Freedom's past depends on membership dues and contributions. The Freedom Historical Society helps us all understand Freedom as a sense of place, like no other.

To our members and donors, we say thank you. We invite you to join or donate today.

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News from Kyle, FHS Co-President

In the short time my family has called Freedom home, this town has carved out a permanent place in our hearts. Watching my boys grow up surrounded by deep roots and genuine neighbors is a gift I don't take for granted. It is a profound honor to live alongside you, and a privilege I hold close to my heart to be entrusted with safeguarding our shared history as Co-President of the Freedom Historical Society.

That appreciation is the heartbeat of our upcoming summer exhibit:

"Summer Camps of Freedom." We chose the theme **"Then. Now. Always."** because the magic of a Freedom summer, the crackle of campfires, the laughter on the lakes, and the friendships forged, never truly fades. It echoes through the generations.

We often discuss history in terms of what is preserved: the sturdy iron of a blacksmith's anvil or the hand-planed wood of a 19th-century chest. But as we prepare for our 2026 season, I've been thinking about the parts of our history that aren't quite so solid. I'm talking about the history that lives in our senses, the rhythm of a summer day, the muscle memory of a knot tied in the dark, and the echoes of a century of laughter. This new exhibit is designed to transport you back to your youth through sound, touch, and hands-on challenges.

We are keeping the specific details a surprise for now, but we invite you to come rediscover the version of yourself that existed when the days felt endless and the lake water was freezing.

I am personally asking you to visit us starting **Saturday, May 23rd**, but please don't come alone. Bring your children and your grandchildren. Let them see your eyes light up as you demonstrate a skill you haven't used in decades. Let them see that the person standing in front of them was once a kid in a canoe, finding their way under a Freedom moon.

To keep these stories alive and our doors open, we rely entirely on the generosity of our community. As you prepare for spring, please consider renewing your membership or making a donation to our 2026 programming by going to our website www.freedomhistoricalsociety.org and clicking on the donation or membership button or send your membership renewal or donation to the FHS at PO Box 548, Freedom, NH 03836. Your support ensures that the "Always" in our theme remains a reality. Warm regards! Kyle

