The Suffolk Resolves: A Neglected Catalyst of the American Revolution

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Abstract

Before Lexington and Concord, glimmers of revolutionary thoughts and ideas existed in the American colonies; however, a document known as the Suffolk Resolves, written in mid-1774, crystallized these divergent ideas into a more consistent response to troubling British policies. The Suffolk Resolves signaled to the First Continental Congress that segments of the American populace, while still loyal to George III, were willing to raise a militia to protect their rights from Parliamentary actions that they deemed harmful to American interests. The Continental Congress’ endorsement of the Resolves shifted the momentum in favor of more radical elements and hardened positions in both Britain and the colonies. This paper analyzes the Suffolk Resolves, the reaction of contemporaries, and their overall significance as a transitional catalyst leading to the American Revolution.

Introduction

On September 11, 1774, Paul Revere set off on horseback from Milton, Massachusetts, carrying a series of resolutions from the Suffolk County Convention in his saddlebags. Over an impressively quick, yet exhausting, five day period, Revere traveled over 350 miles of rough, winding roads with an express mission to deliver the Suffolk Resolves to the First Continental Congress meeting at Carpenter’s Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania1. The First Continental Congress delegates anxiously awaited news from Boston where the Cambridge Powder Alarm had led to reports (later proved false) of bloodshed and destruction of the city. Revere’s arrival brought news of the true situation in Boston but did little to relieve the tense atmosphere. The Resolves he brought initiated bitter debate and “galvanized the First Continental Congress into taking a stand” on Boston’s plight2. The Philadelphia delegates’ endorsement of the Resolves pushed them “to decide what stand to take” on the broader Anglo-American relationship3.

The text of the document, the sentiments of which are mirrored in the text of other county resolves, reflects the tension and frustration of the colonists towards Parliament, while paying lip service to respect for King George III. A newfound assertiveness is expressed throughout the Resolves illustrating the shift in the mindset of Massachusetts citizens; they now see themselves as the rightful leaders of the colony, not obedient servants of Parliament. The document showcases the progression towards war that
began to surface in the colonial American mindset following events like the Cambridge Powder Alarm. The many issues that define the American Revolution, such as taxation without representation, trade interference and the right to a fair trial, are extensively highlighted within the Suffolk Resolves. The document delineates contentious issues more clearly, helping to solidify the growing distance between Britain and her American colonies.

The text contains an opening preamble, penned by Joseph Warren, followed by nineteen specific grievances. The preamble demonstrates the high regard in which Massachusetts held their charter, despite the growth of independent colonial governments. The opening statement is filled with hostile terms directed at British colonial administrators such as: “powerful,” “vengeful,” “arbitrary,” “licentious,” and “parricide.” British administrative personnel are described as “military executioners” and accused of economic exploitation, while their actions are described as “unparalleled usurpation[s] of unconstitutional power.” Warren juxtaposes the strident and exaggerated characterization of the British administrators against the colonists by depicting the latter as “guiltless children” laboring to protect an inheritance built on the “valor and blood” of colonial ancestors. He attacks those who “tamely submit to live, move, and have their being at the arbitrary will of a licentious minister,” describing their position as analogous to that of “voluntary slavery.” These sentiments sparked emotional connections between the colonists, thereby forging common bonds against the British. Warren knew that in order to stand any chance at making an impact on Parliament the colonists would have to put aside their differences and show a united front.

The body of the document contains nineteen grievances or points. Interestingly, the first point emphasizes that loyalty must be maintained to King George III, based on the traditional Lockean concept of the social contract. It acknowledges George III as “our rightful sovereign” and promises allegiance with the understanding that the compact with the original colonists forms the “covenant [which] is the tenure and claim on which are founded our allegiance and submission.” This type of outward adherence to the rule of the monarchy gives the Suffolk Resolves an intermediary position. Colonists had not given up completely on all aspects of their mother country, but they acknowledged the disintegration of relations which had already begun. The expression of loyalty masks deeper discontent highlighted in the second point which stresses the natural right to defend their civil and religious rights and liberties.

Many colonists were most upset with Parliament in 1774 because of the limitations on personal and economic freedoms contained within the Coercive Acts. Because of this, the third and fourth grievances specifically targeted Parliament. The Resolves castigated that body “for blocking up the harbor of Boston, for altering the established form of government in this colony, and for screening the most flagitious violators of the laws of the province from a legal trial,” which the delegates deemed as entitlements “by the laws of nature, the British constitution, and the charter of the province.” This particular complaint provides a perfect example of the disconnect between Great Britain and its American colonists. Great Britain was willing to sacrifice revenue to bring the
troublesome Bostonians in line, which the colonists saw as a sign of tyranny. In their minds “the attempts of [a] wicked administration to enslave America” freed them from obligations of obedience.\(^8\)

Court and legal issues comprised the fifth through eighth grievances within the Resolves. The court systems and justices had forfeited their legitimacy and authority in the eyes of the colonists. The delegates to the Suffolk Convention considered the justices “unconstitutional officers” who operated under “undue influence” as their illegitimate appointments were not, in colonial minds, consistent with the original charter.\(^9\)

This hints at the developing radicalism inherent in the Suffolk Resolves. The Whigs in Massachusetts began to promote the American colonies as separate entities from the mainland of Great Britain. At this stage in colonial history, however, they operated in a transitional space where they wanted control of their own affairs, but with continued protection and trade benefits under British law.

The Resolves also suggested aggressive actions in terms of boycotting British trade and calling for certain individuals to resign their public offices, even issuing an ultimatum that those refusing to do so by September 20th would be considered as “obstinate and incorrigible enemies to this country.”\(^10\) The colonists took this a step further in the ninth through twelfth grievances by recommending the removal of commissions of militia members and advocating that the inhabitants of the colony should prepare to defend themselves, if it became necessary. These points of protest came in reaction to the increased military presence throughout Massachusetts and the newfound threat towards Protestantism following the protection of the Roman-Catholic religion in Canada. The colonies maintained a defensive posture towards military relations with Britain out of “affection to his majesty” and as long as “such conduct may be vindicated by reason and the principles of self-preservation.”\(^11\) This stance further illustrates the transitional nature the Suffolk Resolves held in regards to movement towards revolution.

The thirteenth through nineteenth resolves outline specific measures to create an independent government to combat the “present tyrannical and unconstitutional government.” The Resolves present an ultimatum to British authorities, threatening that in the event of a resistance leader’s arrest, colonists would take royal officials hostage until those seized by the British were freed. A call for Anglo-American trade cessation and the development of American art and manufacturing to offset this boycott of British goods constituted the next step in the Resolves’ plan. The sixteenth and seventeenth grievances supported and encouraged other towns and counties to support the Provincial Congress, meeting later in October, and the currently sitting Continental Congress. Finally, in an effort to counteract the surge of mob-like activities and riots and to allow the colonial elites to reassert their leadership of the resistance, the Resolves called for civil order, particularly the protection of private property.\(^12\)

The content and sentiments of the Suffolk Resolves clearly resonated with other colonial gatherings. The minutes from the Bristol Convention suggest that the way in which Suffolk County responded to British policies in their “spirited and noble
resolutions” echoed their own feelings. The Bristol County convention “cheerfully” adopted the Suffolk Resolves within their own resolutions. The Cumberland Convention demonstrated the same support to Suffolk County as leaders in this challenge to British policy, while also showing awareness of differences between their two situations: “And here we think it proper to observe, that though we do not coincide in every instance with our Suffolk brethren, which may be owing to a want of knowing all the circumstances of affairs, yet we highly applaud their virtuous zeal and determined resolution.”

Despite the similarity in sentiment to those of other counties and the fact that the Middlesex County resolutions arrived three days earlier, the Suffolk Resolves were the only resolutions brought to a vote before Congress. The Middlesex document arrived at a time when, according to Massachusetts delegate Thomas Cushing, “the Congress were very Busy & several large Committees were closely engaged upon matters of great importance.” More importantly, the heightened tension following the Cambridge Powder Alarm created by false rumors of the destruction of Boston would have made the Suffolk pleas seem more urgent. Mobilization in defense of the city inspired the respect of the delegates for those who had prepared to die for the cause. The fact that Boston, the most threatened city, was part of Suffolk County ensured that Congress would be more receptive to that county’s pleas.

Samuel Seabury, a prominent loyalist, commented that the Cambridge Powder Alarm “served also to inflame the congress and to prepare the way for another Boston maneuver [sic].” Seabury asserted that “Their [the Philadelphia delegates] passions were up, their reason disturbed, their judgment distorted; with the most inconsiderate rashness they took the fatal step of adopting a resolution “approving and recommending the conduct of the Suffolk people.”

The importance placed on the Resolves may also have resulted from a strategic decision to frame their transmission to the Continental Congress as seeking advice. The Suffolk Resolves reached the Congress later, but leaders enclosed a letter with “an express application to the Congress for advice.” Therefore, they would both flatter the delegates of the First Continental Congress and force their hand, causing them to take a stand. This introductory letter and request for action, coupled with the tensions over the Powder Alarm, created a sense of urgency in Congress. Historian Ray Raphael suggests that the Resolves were crafted with flair that would impress the “learned delegates” more than other more mundane documents. Perhaps most importantly, the Suffolk Resolves were more thoroughly developed and rationally argued than those of other counties. They offered the most detailed and articulate statement of colonial grievances.

Regardless of the reasons, the Philadelphia delegates brought the Suffolk Resolves to the floor for consideration. The resolutions proved to be a divisive issue for the First Continental Congress and quickly became central to the larger ideological divide. Radicals like Christopher Gadsen, a noted South Carolina delegate and an extreme patriot, wanted a preemptive attack before Britain could reinforce troops, while conservative
members, like Joseph Galloway, still hoped for peaceful reconciliation. Galloway questioned the legitimacy of the Continental Congress and thus their consideration of the Suffolk Resolves, claiming that their instructions authorized only those measures which supported “allegiance to their Sovereign, and that tended to unite, and not to separate the two countries.” Nonetheless, conservative delegates found themselves forced into taking a stand on the specific issue of the Suffolk Resolves as they feared being branded traitors if they appeared to be supporting the unpopular Coercive Acts. Rejecting the Resolves would imply agreement with British policy.

The conservative members expressed shock and viewed the proposed adoption of the Resolves as essentially asking them to condone open rebellion and, potentially, military resistance. While individuals within colonial delegations may have opposed the endorsement of the Suffolk Resolves, official records indicate that Congress unanimously approved these resolutions as each colony voted as a unit. The delegates did, however, urge caution and temperance, supporting only defensive actions in an effort to give Congress time to negotiate with Britain to seek changes in policy. Additionally, the Congress, in what John Adams referred to as an unusual display of public transparency, opted to break with their previous secrecy policy by ordering the Resolves to be printed in local newspapers.

The Continental Congress’ endorsement of the Resolves prompted strong reactions in both American and British circles. The most immediate reactions can be seen in the letters and writings of delegates to the First Continental Congress, which provide insight into the responses of prominent, politically active citizens. The delegates clearly recognized the importance of the Resolves. Comments range from simple mentions of Congress’ actions to passionate statements regarding the proceedings and the Resolves themselves. A letter from George Read, a member of the Delaware delegation, to his wife Gertrude Read on September 18, 1774, reflected the sense of urgency that delegates felt and a realization of the importance of the moment. He informed his wife that he regretted not being able to visit with her, but that he was nonetheless glad that he had remained in Philadelphia as two major points of discussion occurred “in consequence of an application from Boston to the Congress for their advice upon the late measures of General Gage.” Read clearly saw these two matters, the passage of the Suffolk Resolves and a resolution for further colonial support of Boston, as quite significant as he stated that he would have blamed himself had he not been there to participate in the discussion.

Richard Henry Lee, an influential delegate from Virginia, in a letter addressed to his brother, William Lee, on September 20, 1774, noted that the Suffolk Resolves received “concurring support” for Boston and Massachusetts as a whole. He understood that recent events showed that “no small difficulty will attend forcing submission from these people, and they are most firmly resolved to dye [sic] rather than submit to the change of the Government.”

Two dispatches from delegates from Connecticut show that contemporary participants considered the Suffolk Resolves as important business of the First Continental
Congress and recognized it as a unifying measure. A group of delegates from Connecticut sent a letter to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., governor of the Connecticut colony, on October 10, 1774, which stated that the Suffolk Resolves were “highly approved of & applauded.”

Silas Deane, another prominent delegate representing Connecticut, wrote to Thomas Mumford, Connecticut merchant and member of the Council of Safety, on October 16, 1774, that through the adoption of resolutions, such as the Suffolk Resolves, the Continental Congress made the “Cause of Boston” a “Common Cause.”

Not surprisingly two prominent delegates from Massachusetts recorded immediate responses to the Suffolk Resolves as well. John Adams penned a diary entry on September 17, 1774, remarking on the adoption of the Resolves by the First Continental Congress and the sense of unity its endorsement represented. He wrote, “This was one of the happiest Days of my Life. In Congress We had generous, noble Sentiments, and manly Eloquence. This Day convinced me that America will support the Massachusetts [sic] or perish with her.”

However, in a letter to Abigail Adams, he hinted at the overarching divisions which existed in the First Continental Congress under the reported unanimity. He recorded that he witnessed “tears gush into the eyes of the pacifist Pennsylvania Quakers.”

Samuel Adams, who had been heavily involved through communications with his protégé Joseph Warren throughout the development of the Suffolk Resolves, wrote to Warren shortly after the Resolves reached the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Adams remarked on September 19, 1774, that the “spirited and Patriotick [sic] Resolves” of Suffolk County “were read with great applause, and the Enclosed Resolutions were unanimously passed, which give you a faint idea of the spirit of Congress.” However, Samuel Adams did not limit his excitement over the passage of the Resolves to only Warren. In a letter to Boston Congregationalist minister Charles Chauncy also dated September 19, 1774, Adams used essentially the same language.

Together, the letters to Warren and Chauncy indicate Samuel Adams’ recognition that the passage of the Resolves marked a shift in the spirit of the Congress.

Samuel Adams continued to communicate with Warren through various letters, further revealing his sense that the Suffolk Resolves had forever altered political discourse. He suggested that the passage of the Resolves had altered intercolonial relations and created resentment. In a letter of September 25, 1774, Adams apprised Warren of fears of some of the delegates that Massachusetts aimed for true independence, not just independence from Britain. Adams wrote: “There is, however, a certain degree of jealousy in the minds of some, that we aim at a total independency, not only of the mother-country, but of the colonies too; and that, as we are hardy and brave people, we shall have in time overrun them all.”

The excitement originally produced by the adoption of the Resolves among Massachusetts leaders proved to be short lived, as evidenced by a letter from John Adams to Joseph Palmer, Boston glassmaker and later member of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, on September 26, 1774. John Adams related his frustration with Congress for applauding the Resolves, but not following through. He complained of being told
to “stand still, bear, with patience, if you come to a rupture with the troops, all is lost.” He further informed Palmer that the delegates found any notion of independence to be startling.\textsuperscript{36} That frustration is further shown in a letter written three days later to Boston lawyer William Tudor, asserting that Congress praised “our wisdom, fortitude, and temperance,” while taking no action.\textsuperscript{37} Nonetheless, these dispatches from the Adams cousins to multiple Boston leaders illustrate the importance they placed on ensuring that their home colony knew of the support granted by the First Continental Congress, but also warned of the concerns the majority of the Congress had with the potential for full independence it foreshadowed.

While patriot leaders like the Adams cousins welcomed the approval of the Suffolk Resolves and its acknowledgement of a common cause in resisting British policy, not everyone agreed. Loyalist sentiments remained strong and significantly impacted the colonial discourse. As T.H. Breen has argued, “Americans of loyalist persuasion wondered whether the Philadelphia delegates had taken leave of their senses.” One critic observed, half “of America shudder[ed].”\textsuperscript{38} To loyalists, whether delegate or concerned citizen, the Suffolk Resolves threatened division rather than promoting unity.

Joseph Galloway, a moderate delegate (and later loyalist) from Pennsylvania to the First Continental Congress, vehemently opposed the Suffolk Resolves and served as one of the leading conservative voices. In a letter of November 1, 1774, addressed to Thomas Nickleson, Galloway’s brother-in-law, Galloway wrote: “You will no doubt see the Resolves of our Congress and their other Proceedings. I cannot say that I approve of them, they are too warm & indiscreet and in my Opinion have not pursued the right Path to an Accommodation. All the Violent Parts of them I strenuously oppose from Conscience & Judgment and because I was convinced they must widen the Differences between us.”\textsuperscript{339} In Galloway’s opinion, the endorsement of the Suffolk Resolves along with other actions of Congress illustrated that the delegates had “violated” the trust of their constituents and pushed the people into an armed confrontation.\textsuperscript{40}

Galloway’s sentiments did not improve with time. In the 1780 pamphlet \textit{Historical and Political Reflections on the Rise and Progress of the American Rebellion}, he discussed the impact of the Suffolk Resolves in greater detail. He described them as “inflammatory resolves... which contained a complete declaration of war against Great-Britain [sic].” He continued with a condensed description of the “treasonable” contents of the Resolves.\textsuperscript{41} Galloway took the issue of endorsement of the Suffolk Resolves a step further than in his previous pamphlets by arguing that the “treasonable vote” of the First Continental Congress laid the foundation of military resistance throughout America.” From that point, he believed that the loyalists had little hope of stemming the tide and switched his focus to trying to ensure that the separation from Great Britain yielded a system built on constitutional principles and working toward a reconciliation of the two countries.\textsuperscript{42} Galloway ended this pamphlet by illuminating the connection between the passage of the Suffolk Resolves and the events of Lexington and Concord, stating that “the militia in New England become embodied, in pursuance of the recommendation of the Suffolk resolve, and magazines of warlike stores were laid
up to be ready for their use. To seize one of these magazines General Gage sent out a party, which was attacked by the militia at Lexington.” In essence, Galloway situated the beginning of the conflict not in the events of Lexington and Concord, but in the endorsement of the Suffolk Resolves.

Galloway’s sentiments are echoed in the writings of Samuel Seabury, a New York loyalist and Anglican clergyman. He served as one of the first pamphlet writers to attack the actions of the First Continental Congress. He produced four pamphlets between November 1774 and January 1775 urging the rejection of policies adopted by the Congress. In *The Congress Canvassed: Or, An Examination into the Conduct of the Delegates, At Their Grand Convention*, Seabury pointed out many of the same issues with the proceedings of the First Continental Congress as Galloway. However, unlike Galloway, Seabury completed his response within a few months of the actual meeting. Seabury argued that instead of unifying the colonies and the motherland, Congress made the “breach with the parent state a thousand times more irreparable than it was before.” He used the adoption of the Suffolk Resolves as an example of colonial policies which “tend to raise jealousies, to excite animosities, to foment discords between us [the colonies] and our mother country,” while offering no “peace and reconciliation.”

Seabury also referred to the surprise felt by many of the loyalist persuasion at the actions of the First Continental Congress: “Their characters, their stations, their abilities…all concurred to raise my expectations that they would have been of principal advantage in the congress, by moderating and keeping within the bounds the fiery intemperate zeal, which it was too apparent, many of the Delegates carried with them to that assembly. Cruelly was I disappointed, when the account was confirmed, that the congress had unanimously adopted the Suffolk Resolves.” Seabury, along with other loyalists, felt the adoption of the radical Suffolk Resolves effectively limited the influence of more moderate delegates. Another prominent New York loyalist, Myles Cooper, expressed similar discontent in *A Friendly Address to All Reasonable Republicans*, referring to the Resolves as the work of “rebellious Republicans” and claiming “that the people of Suffolk had OPENLY REVOLTED FROM THEIR ALLEGIANCE to the King and his government.”

Thomas Bradbury Chandler, a New Jersey Anglican clergyman, offered a more extreme viewpoint on loyalist discontent towards the actions of the First Continental Congress, specifically in regards to the actions of the delegates and people of Massachusetts, in pamphlets published in 1774 and early 1775. In *A Friendly Address to All Reasonable Americans, on the Subject of our Political Confusions*, Chandler provided his opinion of the Bostonians and leaders of the Massachusetts delegation: “they must be viewed in the light of vanquished rebels, and treated accordingly. Their leaders must be given up into the executioner’s hands; confiscations of their estates forfeited by rebellion, must follow, and all must be left at the mercy of their vanquishers.” Chandler echoed the sentiments of Seabury in regards to the Continental Congress’ failure to live up to his expectations, noting that “the Gentlemen of the Congress, in whom we confided as the faithful guardians of the safety as well as rights of America, were disposed
to enter into a league offensive and defensive with its worst enemies the New England and other Presbyterian Republicans.” He continued that “The fact is notorious to the world; it can neither be denied nor palliated; for they hastily and eagerly published… their cordial approbation of the Suffolk Resolves for erecting an Independent Government in New-England.”

Chandler viewed the endorsement of the Suffolk Resolves as the event which shifted everything from bad to worse, going so far as to say that “a rebellion is evidently commenced in New England, in the county of Suffolk, without room for retreating.”

Chandler’s What Think Ye of the Congress Now? offered further commentary on the significance of the Suffolk Resolves from the viewpoint of a prominent loyalist. He provided a brief summary of the Resolves themselves and stated that they contained the ingredients of a “DECLARATION of INDEPENDENCY.” Furthermore, Chandler reiterated his earlier claim that the passage of the Resolves amounted to “an open revolt and rebellion” germinating from the “people of Suffolk.”

As soon as the First Continental Congress “received by express, an authentic copy of the above-mentioned Suffolk Resolves, they broke through all their rules of secrecy, and, at once, gave such a blast from the trumpet of sedition, as made one half of America shudder.” He further claimed that “they [the First Continental Congress] ought to have sent back [the Suffolk Resolves] with indignation and abhorrence.” Chandler, like many other loyalists, saw the adoption of the Resolves as the event which started open rebellion and believed that it did not reflect the interests of the colonies as a whole.

Word of the passage of the Suffolk Resolves spread widely due to the decree of the Continental Congress that they be published in newspapers, which allowed for responses from those outside formal political circles. For instance, when officers of the Dunmore’s War campaign received word of the Suffolk Resolves, they adopted the Fort Gower Resolutions, “their own bold assertion of colonial rights and complaints.”

As colonial media historian David Copeland shows, colonial newspapers primarily addressed local concerns or issues and events that directly impacted the local population. Therefore, the printing of the Suffolk Resolves in colonies beyond Massachusetts suggests that they were considered to be of wide significance. Newspapers such as the Virginia Gazette, the Pennsylvania Packet, the Massachusetts Gazette, the Essex Gazette, the New Hampshire Gazette, and the Maryland Gazette either reprinted the Suffolk Resolves entirely following their adoption by the First Continental Congress or included excerpts of Gage’s reactions to such events. In many instances, the Suffolk Resolves graced the front page, further testifying to the interest in the document. However, the papers generally simply included the text or key points without comment.

British commentators reacted strongly to the adoption of the Suffolk Resolves by the First Continental Congress, offering more in-depth commentary than American newspapers. The Annual Register of London (a yearly compilation of critical world events) presented the fortification of Boston and the Cambridge Powder Alarm as creating “the most violent and universal ferment that had yet be known” and influencing the Suffolk Convention to endorse stronger measures than any previous attempt at
protesting the actions of Parliament. Additionally, *The Annual Register* noted various county conventions throughout the American colonies, pointing out that “They all agreed in the main points, of holding a congress, of not submitting to the payment of any internal taxes, that were not, as usual, imposed by their own assemblies, and of suspending all commerce with the mother country, until the American grievances in general, and those of Massachusetts-Bay in particular, were fully redressed.”

The Annual Register also provided a summary of Gage’s response and delivered interesting commentary on the aftermath in Boston of these actions, “Those of Boston, either were, or pretended to be, under continual terror, from the apprehensions of immediate danger, to their lives. They were in the hands of an armed force whom they abhorred, and who equally detested them… Each side professed the best intentions in the world for itself, and shewed [sic] the greatest suspicion of the other.” The publishers of The Annual Register considered the attempt of merging varying colonial interests into one unified body through the First Continental Congress “undoubtedly a dangerous experiment to bring matters to this crisis” and questioned the need for secrecy. Since the Declaration of Rights and Grievances, a considerably milder set or resolutions, was described as a document that “rather reproaches us [the British] with a shameful degeneracy,” the harsher Suffolk Resolves would likely have drawn similar sentiments.

The Suffolk Resolves were reprinted, sometimes even separately from the other proceedings of the First Continental Congress, in a number of newspapers, including the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, *London Evening Post*, *The Morning Chronicle* and *London Advertiser*, and *The Southampton Hampshire Chronicle*. An unidentified newspaper report claimed that British “friends of America” would take comfort in knowing that endorsement of the Resolves “confounded the ministry, as by it they perceive the Union of the Colonies to be complete.” Although little commentary was included with the reprints, the fact that a group of county-level colonial resolutions made the British news suggests their significance in the eyes of at least some segments of the British public.

British officials, in a variety of capacities, commented directly on the Suffolk Resolves, expressing great alarm at the outright rebellion they saw in the resolutions. Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage received an address, in addition to a copy of the Suffolk Resolves, from the Suffolk Convention, printed in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* on September 21, 1774. This address requested Gage’s comment on the Suffolk Resolves and again reiterated that “the people of this county are by no means disposed to injure his Majestytroops [sic]; they think themselves aggrieved and oppressed by the late acts of Parliament, and are resolved, by Divine assistance, never to submit to them, but have no inclination to commence a war with his Majestytroops [sic].” Gage submitted a short response on September 15, 1774, printed in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* on September 28, 1774. Gage attempted to smooth things over by defending the “general good behavior” of the soldiers and questioning the removal of guns “privately in the night from the battery in Charlestown” by Boston citizens. He further stated, “The re-
fusing submission to the late acts of Parliament, I find general throughout the province, and I shall lay the same before his Majesty.”66 The Suffolk Convention responded once more by providing clear examples of abuse by the troops and reiterating the need for the reopening of the port “as nature has formed it” and argues that “the most honourable method of making them [the colonists] secure and safe, will be to give the people of the province the strongest proof that no design is forming against their liberties.”67 John Richard Alden, a biographer of Gage, described the Governor as “polite and gracious to delegations” from Suffolk County and said he “displayed prudence and coolness” towards the colonists during the situation.68 Bernard Donoughue claimed that “Gage’s dispatches revealed that the Commander-In-Chief’s morale was ebbing.”69 In his private letters to Lord Barrington, Secretary of War, in the last four months of 1774, Gage sounds like a prophet of doom in describing the changes in American affairs. On September 25, 1774, Gage wrote that the Americans had taken the Coercive Acts as a challenge and remarked on November 2, 1774, that the colonists would rather fight than give in.70 On September 17, 1774, in a letter to Thomas Hutchinson, Gage urged the government to suspend the Coercive Acts and ask Massachusetts to send emissaries to London in an attempt to alleviate the issues illustrated in the Suffolk Resolves. Otherwise, he stated he would need 20,000 additional troops to end the rebellion.71

Governor Gage’s predecessor, Thomas Hutchinson, also reacted directly to the endorsement of the Suffolk Resolves. Upon hearing of the news, he commented that the vote was “more alarming than anything which has yet been done.” Bernard Baily, in The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson, argues that the passage of the Resolves transformed Hutchinson’s world – the plan he had worked out was “now totally irrelevant.”72 Hutchinson is quoted as stating that the passage of the Suffolk Resolves “are enough to put it out of my power to make any accommodation.”73 He further recounted meeting with Lord Dartmouth, Secretary of State for the Colonies, and John Pownall, the Undersecretary of State for the American Department, in London and finding them “thunderstruck” by the news.74 Hutchinson said of the issues between Britain and her colonies following the actions of the First Continental Congress that “so important an affair has not come before Parl [sic] since the [Glorious] Revolution” and commented that the “hostile Resolves of the Congress of Philadelphia had taken the English people by surprise.” In a November 1, 1774 diary entry, Hutchinson further described the arrival of the Suffolk Resolves as pushing him to a point where “It is out of my power any longer to promote a plan of conciliation.” He recounted Lord Dartmouth saying “if these Resolves of your people are to be depended on, they have declared War against us: they will not suffer any sort of Treaty.”75 Hutchinson further remarked that “all plans of that sort [reconciliation] are now at an end, or at least, suspended.”76

Accounts of other British officials reflect similar sentiments. According to John Pownall’s notes of a Cabinet meeting on December 18, 1774, Attorney General Thurlow and Soliciter General Wedderburn characterized the Suffolk Resolves as “treasonous.”77 Lord Dartmouth commented on the Suffolk Resolves’ adoption, declaring that, in his view, this confirmed that the British government could not retreat. He con-
demned the signers as guilty of treason and called for their vigorous punishment. On November 19, 1774, in response to a series of letters and correspondence received from Governor Gage, King George III wrote to Lord North describing the colonists as “ripe for mischief” and Gage’s recommendation of suspending Parliamentary acts as preposterous. He stated that Britain “must either master them or totally leave them to themselves and treat them as aliens.”

The Suffolk Resolves furthered the divide between the mother country and colonies and served to crystallize the opposition to British policy into a more unified voice. In this sense they served as a transitional catalyst towards revolution. The First Continental Congress’ endorsement of the Suffolk Resolves gave more radical elements the momentum and emboldened Massachusetts in their resistance. Chances of compromise dimmed. Furthermore, the Resolves contributed to the unity or “Common Cause” of the colonies because the approval essentially condoned measures the colonists knew Britain would view as treasonous. As Revolutionary War archivist and author Todd Andrlik argued, “by sanctioning the Resolves, Congress supported deeds as well as words. It vowed to stand behind a revolution that was in full swing throughout Massachusetts.”

As T.H. Breen noted, for the colonists “this moment signaled the birth of a united movement to resist oppression,” which the North cabinet should ignore at its own peril. While some Americans remained optimistic that the relationship could be repaired, British officials saw that conciliation was no longer possible. This strengthened the resolve of the British cabinet. As Lord Dartmouth realized, retreat was not an option. The lines were drawn long before the first bloodshed at Lexington and Concord.

Notes

3. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 602.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 602-603.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 604.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 604-605.
13Ibid., 627.
14Ibid., 658.
19Ibid.
20Cushing to Devens and Foster, Letters of Delegates to Congress, 84-85.
25John Adams to Abigail Adams, September 18, 1774, in Letters of Members of the First Continental Congress, 35.
26George Read to Gertrude Read, September 18, 1774, in . Letters of Delegates to Congress.
27Richard Henry Lee to William Lee, September 20, 1774, in Letters of Delegates to Congress.
28Connecticut Delegates to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., October 10, 1774, in Letters of Delegates to Congress.
29Silas Deane to Thomas Mumford, October 16, 1774, in Letters of Delegates to Congress.
30John Adams, Diary, September 17, 1774, in Letters of Members of the First Continental Congress, 34.
31John Adams to Abigail Adams, September 18, 1774, in Letters of Members of the First Continental Congress, 35.
32Samuel Adams to Joseph Warren, September 19, 1774, in Cushing, 2:156.
33Samuel Adams to Charles Chauncy, September 19, 1774, in Letters of Delegates to Congress.
35 Samuel Adams to Joseph Warren, September 25, 1774, in Cushing, 2: 156.
39 Joseph Galloway to Thomas Nickleson, November 1, 1774, Letters of Delegates to Congress.
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