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Henry Wisner



A MEMORIAL OF HENRY WISNER,

THE ONLY NEW YORKER WHO VOTED FOR THE DECLARATION
OF INDEPENDENCE.

Henry Wisner ✓

HENRY WISNER'S grandfather was born in Switzerland, and fought against Louis XIV., of France, in the allied army under the Prince of Orange, and afterwards under the Duke of Marlborough. When their warlike toils were done, Queen Anne undertook to provide some of the foreign troops a home in the Colony of New York. Among the emigrants were Johannis Weesner, and his wife Elizabeth, and his son Hendrick. Another son, Adam, was born on the passage.

The poor emigrants encamped for some months on Governor's Island. Then Johannis Weesner seems to have hired himself to labor on the farm of Christian Suedicor, of Hempstead, Long Island. Suedicor owned land on the Wawayanda Patent, in Orange County, and sent Weesner there to bring part of it into cultivation. By paying £30, Weesner became the owner of this backwoods farm on June 23, 1715. It is supposed that the situation is in the present town of Warwick, near Mount Eye, on the border of the *Drowned Lands*. The district was called Florida as early as 1733.

Johannis Weesner died a little before May 19, 1744. His children were Hendrick and Adam, Katharine wife of Thomas Blain, Ann wife of Philip King, and Mary.

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Hendrick Wisner married a New England woman, named Shaw, by whom he had Henry Wisner—born, probably about 1720—John, and one daughter. John Wisner was a captain in the French War and in the Revolution. His military career had a bad termination. He died near the end of 1778.

Henry Wisner was a tall man; vigorous and erect, even in old age. Like his neighbors, he had little learning, but had natural abilities and pleasing address, and was appointed Justice of the Peace.

He married, probably about 1740, Sarah Norton, of Queens County, and received with her a farm there. He owned a few slaves and considerable land about Goshen. His house was a mile south of the village, on the Florida road. It was a stone house, but is no longer standing. It is said to have once entertained General Washington and Baron Steuben.

Wisner was prominent in the boundary war between New Jersey and Orange County, and in 1754 it seems there was a company of Jerseymen formed to take him and Col. DeKay, "dead or alive."

Wisner served in the New York Colonial Assembly, from 1759 to 1769. The only bill of any interest introduced by him was on December 12th, 1759, to enable himself, John Alsop, John Morin Scott, John Van Courtlandt and Joseph Sacket, part proprietors of the patent of Wawayanda, to sell enough of the undivided land to obtain £1,500 to be applied in draining the *Drowned Lands*. They were an extensive cedar marsh, annually submerged by the rise of the Wallkill. Drainage has since largely rendered them capable of cultivation, to the profit and health of the inhabitants.

In 1769, Henry Wisner and John Haring were candidates, but were defeated by two Tories. They complained of fraudulent practices, but finding the Assembly inclined against him, Wisner withdrew from the contest.

This legislature continued seven years, and was an unpatriotic body. It is supposed to be the last in the Colony of N. Y; but there really was another elected on February 1st, 1776 in New York City, and about the same time in the other counties. Haring was one of the two members chosen in Orange County, and it is probable that Wisner was the other, but I have no special evidence of it.

Wisner strenuously espoused the side of Colonial rights, and warmly opposed the pretensions of the English Parliament. Rivington's Tory paper (in 1781) put "old Wisner" among the "tyrants," and "unfeeling malefactors," of whom the Loyalists complained the highest.

On August 15th, 1774, Orange County chose Wisner and Haring to attend the Continental Congress then about to be held in Philadelphia, to concert measures of resistance to British aggressions. The Congress began in Carpenter's Hall, on September 5th, but Wisner did not take his seat in it until the 14th.

This Congress is eulogized as a body of the highest patriotism by historians who are still deceived by the skillful measures taken to keep its dissensions secret. In fact, many of its members were inclined to Toryism. I have stated, in a *Life of Simon Boerum*, the reasons for believing that the Tory leader, Galloway, of Pennsylvania, controlled at first six colonies—Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina and New York. As Georgia was not represented, and Rhode Island was neutralized, the prospects were bad for the patriots. When Galloway introduced his plan of accommodation with England, on September 28th, the New York delegation appears to have stood 5 for it (Low, Alsop, Jay, Duane, and Livingston), and 3 against it (Wisner, Floyd and Haring.) But, on October 1st, Boerum, of Kings County, came to the Congress and apparently persuaded Philip Livingston to change sides, which de-

terminated the vote of New York against Galloway, 5 to 4. This was an event of vital importance, as Galloway was finally defeated, on October 22d, by a vote of six colonies to five.

The other proceedings of this Congress belong to history, rather than to the biography of Henry Wisner, as nothing is known of his part in them, except that he signed the petition to the King and the Articles of Association.

The New York delegation, in the second Continental Congress, was not chosen by the counties separately, but by a Provincial Convention, in New York City. To this Convention, Henry Wisner and Peter Clowes were unanimously elected, at the annual town meeting, held at Goshen, April 4th, 1775.

By the Provincial Convention, on April 21st, 1775, Wisner was chosen one of the delegates to the second Continental Congress. The instructions given were "to concert and determine upon such measures as shall be judged most effectual for the preservation and re-establishment of American rights and privileges, and for the restoration of harmony between Great Britian and the Colonies."

The second Continental Congress met in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, on May 10th, 1775, but Wisner did not appear until the 15th. He was not a prominent member of this body, but took part in its patriotic measures, including the wonderfully fortunate selection of a Commander-in-Chief of the American armies.

Wisner's attention was early directed to a humble, but very important subject, of which, in a letter dated Philadelphia, December 21st, 1775, he writes. "Having, for many months, been sensibly affected with the great disadvantage the Colonies labor under for want of ammunition, I thought it my duty to apply myself to the attainment of those necessary arts of making saltpetre

and gunpowder, and having far exceeded my expectations in both manufactures, I think myself further obliged to communicate the so much needed knowledge to my country at large." After giving an account of the method by which gunpowder is made, he says: "I have lately erected a powder-mill in the south end of Ulster County, in the Colony of New York, at which I have made as good powder as I ever have seen." He concludes "I therefore most heartily recommend to the good people of this Continent, to enter into these necessary businesses with spirit, being well assured, that a greater quantity may with ease be made than will be needed for our consumption, even admitting the times to be worse than the threats of the British administration would lead us to expect. Any person inclining to build a powder-mill, will be shown a plan, with directions for the construction of all its parts, and utensils, by applying to their very humble servant, HENRY WISNER."

By a letter to the New York Provincial Congress, dated, March 28th, 1776, it appears that Wisner was then in Goshen devoted to powder-making. The conclusion of it is, "As powder is an article that will take a considerable time to dry, especially at this time of the year, so that we shall have in the drying-house, at least 2,000 weight all the time; in that case, query, whether there will not be danger of some Tory setting fire to it in the night, by firing the house: if so, query, whether it would not be right to keep a guard: if so, as the powder all belongs to the public, query, whether the expense ought not to be borne by the public. I should be glad of an answer by the first opportunity." "P. S. If you should think proper to order a guard, I believe four men will be sufficient for that purpose. I hope you will excuse this scrawl; I should have copied, but have only three half sheets more of paper, and do not know where to get the next."

Henry Wisner gave up his powder-mill in Ulster County to his son, Major Henry Wisner, and erected two powder-mills in Orange Co , in May, 1776. It would not be interesting to give the amounts of powder delivered, and money received from the New York Provincial Congress, but the importance of Wisner's services, in providing so essential an article of war, can be readily appreciated. He was otherwise serviceable to the patriotic cause, by having spears made and gun flints, and by repairing the roads in Orange County by which provisions and other necessaries were transported to the American army. He also attended to collecting lead and to the manufacture of salt, and to fortifying the Hudson River against the passage of British vessels.

On June 8th, 1776, Wisner was at the Continental Congress, and his name, with others, was then signed to a letter to the New York Provincial Congress, seeking direction from that body how to vote on the expected question of American 'Independence. It is an important point in this letter, that it says "*some of us* consider ourselves as bound, by our instructions, not to vote on that question." Hence, *other some* considered themselves at liberty to so vote. However, the New York Provincial Congress replied that it had given no authority to declare the Colony independent of the crown of Great Britain, and this decided the New York delegates to refrain from voting, as appears by a letter dated July 2d, 1776, and signed by George Clinton, Henry Wisner, John Alsop, William Floyd and Francis Lewis. It is probable that this letter was written by Wisner, as he sent it to the New York Provincial Congress with a note of his own, saying, "Since writing the enclosed, the question of Independence has been put in Congress, and carried in the affirmative, without one dissenting vote." This means that no Colony voted against it, but that on July 2d, twelve Colonies acting for thirteen, resolved

that the United Colonies are free and independent States. This then is the genuine national birth-day.

Afterwards, it appears by the joint letter of July 2d, there was doubt among the New York delegates, whether their Colony was bound by the act of the Majority, and whether they ought to vote on all such questions as might arise in consequence of Independence, or only to vote for measures of absolute necessity for the common safety. This doubt was removed by the unanimous ratification of Independence, by the New York Provincial Congress, on July 9th, 1776. But in the meantime the Declaration of Independence, prepared for presentation to the world, was adopted by the Continental Congress; first in committee of the whole, and then in ordinary session July 4th. Now we have the neglected testimony of the intelligent and honorable Thomas McKean, a Delaware member present on July 4th, that Henry Wisner voted for Independence. It is contained in four letters, one dated September 26th, 1796, and printed in Sanderson's Biography, another, dated August 22, 1813, and lithographed in Brotherhead's Book of the Signers, a third, dated January, 1814, and printed in Vol. X of John Adams' works, and a fourth, dated June 16th, 1817, and printed in the appendix to Christopher Marshall's Diary.

The bold and patriotic character of George Clinton, the father of the Revolution in New York, renders it probable that he also voted for Independence, but I have found no special evidence of it.

It is discreditable that there is no monument or other record bearing the names of the voters of Independence. The so-called signers of the Declaration are members of the Congress after August 2d, who were required to thus commit themselves to the cause. On July 4th about twelve of them were not at the Congress, and two, and probably more of them, refused to vote for Independ-

ence. These fourteen gentlemen have had immortality given them by the carelessness of history, to the exclusion of Henry Wisner who better deserves it.

Wisner's duties called him to New York (? July 12th) before the Declaration of Independence was engrossed on parchment and ready for signing, but he continued an unattending member of the Continental Congress until May 13th, 1777, when a new delegation was elected by New York. The compensation received was four dollars for every day of absence from home.

The compilers of the New York Civil List, confused by the identity of names of father and son, omit the fact that Henry Wisner, Sr., was ever a member of the New York Provincial Congress. He took his seat on July 23d, 1776, and continued to the end, May 13th, 1777. On August 1st, 1776, Wisner was appointed on a committee to frame a Plan of Government for the State of New York. They reported the first New York Constitution on March 12th, 1777, and their work was debated till finally adopted, on April 20th. John Jay sought to make the Constitution as objectionable as possible to the Roman Catholics, and Wisner supported him.

Under the Constitution, the State was divided into five Senatorial Districts, and the Middle District, comprising the counties of Orange, Ulster and Dutchess, was represented by Henry Wisner in the State Senate, from 1777 to 1782.

In 1779 Henry Wisner lost his younger son, Lieutenant-Colonel Gabriel Wisner, in the battle of Minisink. His fate was long unknown, but there is an interesting, though curiously unindignant, account in Stone's Life of Brant, how that savage tomahawked him after the battle. Gabriel Wisner had married Elizabeth Waters, and his elder brother, Henry Wisner, Jr., married Sarah Waters. Henry Wisner, Sr., had three daughters—Elizabeth, wife of John Denton; Mary, wife of Phineas Helmes; and Sarah, wife of Moses Phillips.

After the triumphant close of the Revolution, the only public service of Henry Wisner was in the New York Constitutional Convention of 1788, which ratified the U. S. Constitution. But Wisner voted in the negative with other staunch patriots, who feared that a strong federal government would overpower State and individual rights.

Wisner's death was a little before September 14th, 1790 (probate of will). This great patriot appears to have been given no stone to preserve the memory of his resting place. There is an uncertain tradition that he was buried on his own farm near the house, and that his widow (who survived him 13 years), was laid beside him.

FRANKLIN BURDGE,

325 West 57th St., N. Y.

30th September, 1878.





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