

## A 'SACRED HONOR' UPHELD: RICHARD STOCKTON AND HIS ALLEGIANCE TO THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence declaring “that all men . . . are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” and “that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>1</sup> All 56 Signers pledged their “Lives, . . . Fortunes and . . . Sacred Honor” to preserve and protect these self-evident truths.<sup>2</sup> Seventeen joined the military. One in nine lost his life. Many lost their fortunes. But “not one man of the fifty-six [signers] lost his ‘sacred honor’” as “there was not . . . a single defection” among them.”<sup>3</sup>

This assertion has been challenged as a “legend.”<sup>4</sup> Many believe that Richard Stockton, a signer from New Jersey, recanted his support for independence by accepting a pardon from General William Howe, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army. They claim that, as a condition to receiving this pardon, Stockton swore allegiance to the British Crown. Frederick Weiner, for example, stated: “following capture by the British and under pressure of a harsh confinement . . . [Stockton] did then defect, by taking an oath of obedience to the king and pledging that he would take no further part in the pending struggle.”<sup>5</sup>

Stockton was captured by the British just four months after signing the Declaration of Independence. The British had just invaded New Jersey leaving Stockton and his family with little time to escape. On the night of November 30, 1776, Stockton was “dragged from his bed” by Tories

1 Jefferson, Thomas, *et al*, *Copy of Declaration of Independence*. July 4, 1776.

2 *Id*.

3 Tourtellot, Arthur Bernon, “We Mutually Pledge To Each Other Our Lives, Our Fortunes And Our Sacred Honor.” *American Heritage*, December 1962. Accessed December 21, 2020. <https://www.americanheritage.com/we-mutually-pledge-each-other-our-lives-our-fortunes-and-our-sacred-honor#4>.

4 See, e.g., Steelman, Ben, “Founders’ Lives Proves Freedom Wasn’t Free.” *Star News Online*, June 28, 2019. Accessed December 23, 2020. <https://www.starnewsonline.com/news/20190628/founders-lives-prove-freedom-wasnt-free>; “5 Obscure Facts About the Declaration of Independence.” Neatorama, July 4, 2007.

<https://www.neatorama.com/2007/07/04/5-obscure-facts-about-the-declaration-of-independence/>; McBurney, Christian M., “Was Richard Stockton a Hero?” *Journal of the American Revolution*, July 18, 2016. Accessed December 10, 2020. <https://allthingsliberty.com/2016/07/was-richard-stockton-a-hero/>.

5 Wiener, Frederick Bernays, “The Signer Who Recanted.” *American Heritage*, June 1975. Accessed December 23, 2020. <https://www.americanheritage.com/signer-who-recanted>.

and handed over to the British.<sup>6</sup> He was placed in shackles, transported to New York City, imprisoned, and treated like a common criminal. On the day of Stockton's capture, General Howe delivered a Proclamation to the imprisoned Americans. In exchange for a full pardon, a prisoner simply had to sign a pledge of peace and loyalty to the British crown to be released.

Stockton refused the pardon. Because of this, his captors starved and exposed him to freezing cold weather. After nearly five weeks of this cruel treatment, the Continental Congress directed General George Washington, on January 3, 1777, to file, on Stockton's behalf, a protest with General Howe opposing this "shocking and inhuman treatment."<sup>7</sup> Through Washington's efforts, Stockton was released on parole on the condition that he desist from further participation in the war. This release, unfortunately, triggered questions about Stockton's loyalty.

Shortly after the release, a rumor that Stockton had agreed to a pardon and, thus, had pledged loyalty to the British crown began circulating. The rumor was started by a "Mr. Cochran," a Tory who had opposed the American Revolution. But as Reverend John Witherspoon explained in a letter, "Mr. Cochran's known quarrel with [Stockton] makes [this rumor] very doubtful to candid persons."<sup>8</sup> In March 1777, just two months after Stockton's release, General Howe corroborated that "at no time had a leading rebel sought pardon."<sup>9</sup>

Stockton upheld his allegiance to America. Because he had an opportunity to recant his support for American independence but refused to do so, the notion that "not one man of the fifty-six [signers] lost his 'sacred honor'" remains true.<sup>10</sup>

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6 Sanderson, John, *Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010), 195.

7 "Richard Stockton," The Society of the Descendants of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://www.dsdi1776.com/signers-by-state/richard-stockton/>.

8 *Id.*

9 "Richard Stockton," The Society of the Descendants of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://www.dsdi1776.com/signers-by-state/richard-stockton/>.

10 Tourtellot, Arthur Bernon, "We Mutually Pledge To Each Other Our Lives, Our Fortunes And Our Sacred Honor." *American Heritage*, December 1962. Accessed December 21, 2020. <https://www.americanheritage.com/we-mutually-pledge-each-other-our-lives-our-fortunes-and-our-sacred-honor#4>.

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WORD COUNT INCLUDING TITLE:	529 words
WORD COUNT NOT INCLUDING TITLE:	516 words
WORD COUNT INCLUDING TITLE BUT NOT INCLUDING THE WORDS “A” AND “THE”:	483 words
WORD COUNT NOT INCLUDING TITLE AND NOT INCLUDING THE WORDS “A” AND “THE”:	470 words