

# STORIES of New Jersey

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44 Chestnut Street, Newark, New Jersey

## ABRAHAM CLARK



*Abraham Clark*

Both the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Sons of the American Revolution have erected monuments to Abraham Clark, but the greatest monument was the one built by the man himself in his unceasing fight to build American democracy. Nothing was too minute for his attention: he complained that members of Congress did not gather punctually at 10 o'clock. And nothing was too great for his ability, for he contributed to the solution of the major problems that beset the new country which he helped establish.

Clark was born February 1, 1726 on his father's farm in what is now Roselle. His father was an alderman in Elizabethtown and later a magistrate, and the boy might not have risen any higher had he been able to do the heavy work around the farm expected of young men in his position. But because his health was very poor and his nature exceptionally

studious, Clark's parents encouraged him to make a career of mathematics and civil law.

Mathematics led him to surveying, in which he soon became expert, and his other vocation, law, was responsible for a growing reputation and eventual political prominence. A man of integrity and sound judgment, he willingly contributed his legal talents to the needy and earned the title throughout the state of "Poor Man's Counsellor." Later, after he had become a political leader, he was called by another nickname--"Congress Abraham"--to distinguish him from others of the same name.

As a surveyor and real estate broker, Clark was appointed by the Assembly in 1764 to divide the common lands in Bergen Township among the property owners. This first political appointment was followed two years later by his election to the office of High Sheriff of Essex County and appointment to a board of road commissioners to lay out and build a highway between Trenton and Newark.

In December 1774 Clark became a member of the Committee of Safety, and the following May he was elected to represent Elizabethtown in the Provincial Congress which drafted the State's first constitution. Among the duties laid upon him by the governing body was providing gun powder for strategic points within the State.

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New Jersey Clark, Abraham & Hart, John

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His close attention to the affairs of the State was not relaxed while he was devoting his energies to national problems as a member of the Continental Congress. His flourishing signature is affixed to many important Congressional reports as well as to the Declaration of Independence. Yet despite the time that these reports must have taken, Governor Livingston could report to a friend that the New Jersey legislature in 1778 had "passed many valuable and spirited laws and dispatched more business than usual which is principally to be ascribed to Mr. Clark who has indeed great talents for legislation and is a man of indefatigable industry."

Though he worked hard and with seeming confidence in the successful outcome of the struggle, Clark was beset by doubts, sometimes expressed in letters to friends. "Perhaps our congress will be exalted on a high gallows," he wrote in August 1776. "It is not in our numbers, our union, our valour, I dare trust. I think an interposing Providence hath been evident in all the events that necessarily led us to what we are--I mean independent states; but for what purpose, whether to make us a great empire, or to make our ruin more complete, the issue only can determine."

Clark expected this same devotion to duty from others. Late in the war, January 1778, when dissatisfaction smouldered throughout the army, "Congress Abraham" hit at the officers who chafed under the burden of things gone wrong. "...Who that are either incivil or military departments are not weary and wish for retirement?" he asked. "This is no time to talk of ease and retirement; let us first establish our liberties--our desires of ease will be then obtained."

He never hesitated to rebuke even those in the highest positions. When General Washington ordered that all who did not declare allegiance to the Continental Congress would be treated as enemies, Clark rose furiously in defense of civil liberties. The Congress had directly opposed any such requirement. "Though I believe him honest," Clark declared of the general, "I think him fallible." He took issue frequently with Governor Livingston, too. They disagreed chiefly on the questions of complete isolation from Europe and on a loose federal government, both of which Clark favored.

An exceptional politician, Clark was intimately concerned with the nation's government. Not until the Bill of Rights had been included did he approve the Constitution, and it was on his motion that a committee drew up the law which put the Constitution into operation.

On September 15, 1804, the slender, still upright man, creasing his heavy brows before the bright sun, was watching a group of workmen build a bridge across the stream that ran through his meadow. Suddenly he collapsed, and a little later he died of sunstroke. They buried Abraham Clark in the cemetery of the Rahway Presbyterian Church, and on his gravestone was written the epitaph: "Firm and decided as a patriot, zealous and faithful as a friend to the public, he loved his country and adhered to her cause in the darkest hours of her struggle against oppression."



*Here the Declaration was adopted.*

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### JOHN HART

John Hart was a New Jersey country squire till as a man of 50 he threw himself furiously into the battle for American independence. "Honest John Hart" his neighbors called him, and by his uncompromising attitude he strengthened his claim to that title. There were few of the political leaders in the state who suffered as he did for his principles; no one more than he deserved the honor of signing the Declaration of Independence.

Born in 1713 or early in 1714, Hart was the son of a farmer who had moved to Hopewell with a group of friends. Practically nothing is known of his early life. From the misspellings and unpractised handwriting of his few letters, it is apparent that his education was meagre. It has even been suggested that someone else had to sign his name to the Declaration of Independence.



*John Hart*

Hart was married in 1740 to Deborah Scudder of nearby Ewing. He prospered in business and by the time the older ones of his 12 children were grown he left the care of his large farm to them and devoted his time to the management of two mills, his brokerage in Philadelphia and the minor office of Justice of the Peace of Hunterdon County. By 1761 Hart had become an influential member of his community and was elected to his first term in the Colonial Assembly.

Not once in his career would Hart come to terms with the opponents of liberty. He voted against the Stamp Act in 1765, and three years later voted for a resolution that insisted that only the colonists had the right to levy taxes in America. Hart's stiffest fight came in 1770, after he had been elected to the legislature a second time. The assembly had voted not to support the King's troops in New Jersey, a very serious decision. The last royal governor, William Franklin, demanded that the enactment be withdrawn, and the assembly fell in with his wishes. But on this second test Hart was one of five men who would not back down. The next year he was victorious, and the resolution was passed over the governor's objections.

Despite Hart's opposition to "taxation without representation" and to supporting the royal army, Governor Franklin in 1774 appointed him Judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Hunterdon County. That same year Hart accepted another, more important duty--he became a member of the first Provincial Congress of New Jersey which at length deposed William Franklin. Hart was entrusted with preparing a budget for the defense of the colony, setting up the militia, founding the Court of Admiralty and raising money. When the Congress was recessed, important tasks were performed by the committee of safety, and of this select group John Hart was also a member.

Honors and additional duties were piled upon him. As one of New Jersey's five delegates to the Continental Congress Hart signed the Declaration of Independence. The following August he was elected speaker of New Jersey's Provincial Congress under the first State Constitution.

When war came, John Hart was a marked man. As the British penetrated New Jersey, he led the governing body from Princeton to Burlington to Pittston and finally to Haddonfield, where it was dissolved.

His wife ill and his property devastated, Hart fled for his life to a hidden spot, difficult of access, in the Sourland Mountains. For many weeks he lived the life of a hunted animal sheltered by a pile of rocks, now called the "Stone House." His dog was his only companion, and his only contact with the outside world was his Negro servant, Jack, who visited the mountain hideout occasionally.

Broken in health by the ordeal of the mountains and grief-stricken by the death of his wife, Hart nevertheless reconvened the legislature when Washington's victories at Trenton and Princeton made it possible for him to return home. At the meeting in Trenton January 1777, he was re-elected speaker. For a year and a half Hart struggled against collapse to serve his country. Then on May 11, 1779 he died at his home in Hopewell.

Hart was buried in the private cemetery of a neighbor, John P. Hunt, a few miles from his home. A plain stone lay above his grave, but one of the townspeople put a secret mark on it which 85 years later, when the legislature wished to honor Hart, served as identification. The Signer's remains were then removed to the graveyard of the Baptist Church in Hopewell, and over the new burial place was erected the first monument ever to be dedicated by the State to an outstanding citizen.

In the Statehouse at Trenton hangs a picture which is claimed to be of John Hart. It shows a handsome young man with long, curly black hair reaching to his shoulders. An account written by a contemporary describes Hart as a tall man with a dark complexion, blue eyes and "black to very black hair." The Hopewell Museum officials hardly agree with this description, for among their exhibits is a lock of hair which they say is John Hart's. It is red.

