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The scene of the conference as conceived by a later artist, John Ward Dunsmore. At the far right, Admiral Lord Howe listens as Benjamin Franklin speaks. Between them is John Adams. Edward Rutledge is seated at the left. Howe's secretary, Henry Strachey, would also have been at the table. Painting reproduced courtesy of Title Guarantee Company.

The Staten Island Peace Conference: September 11, 1776

Ernest and Gregory Schimizzi

NEW YORK STATE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION
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Offices:
99 Washington Avenue, Room 1807
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Admiral Lord Richard Howe, who sought and received his peacemaking commission from a reluctant British government. Detail from an engraving by H. Robinson after the Gainsborough portrait in Trinity House, London.

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION between Britain and her American colonies in September 1776 seemed as unlikely to many at that time as it does to us looking back from today. The first military clashes had occurred over a year and a half earlier, and the Declaration of Independence was over two months old. British troops had been driven from Boston; the American army had been driven from Long Island and now faced the prospect of losing Manhattan to a superior amphibious force. Yet there was to be a pause at this point for a high-level meeting on the subject of peace.

This was the Staten Island Peace Conference, initiated by the British and held within their lines in a seventeenth-century house on the southern tip of the island. The Billop House, as the site has traditionally been called, is preserved today and open to the public. The story of the peace conference it memorializes should be equally available to the public. This is the story.

The best place to begin is in late October, 1775, when an uncertain British ministry under Lord North agreed to crack open the door to negotiations for a peaceful end to the six-months rebellion in the American colonies. Two months later, Parliament passed the Prohibitory Act, which banned all trade with the Americans, but which also contained a section empowering the king to appoint peace commissioners. These men would have the power to grant pardons to Americans who renounced the revolution, and could also, under certain circumstances, declare any part of the colonies to be at peace with the crown and therefore exempt from further coercion. The

king subsequently named two brothers to serve as his commissioners. One was Admiral Lord Richard Howe, the recently appointed commander of the Atlantic squadron; the other was General Sir William Howe, the senior military officer in North America.

Both brothers had distinguished records of wartime leadership dating back to the Seven Years War. They were rated among the ablest commanders in the king's service. Moreover, they were members of a family the king was partial to. He apparently accepted the view widely held in court circles that his grandfather, George I, had sired the Howes' mother, thus making them cousins. But neither man was known as a diplomat or a political leader in Parliament. Why they were empowered to talk peace while making war is a question about British politics.

After getting the bad news of Bunker Hill in July, 1775, both King George and a majority in Parliament had lost patience with all diplomatic compromises. Peace terms could be debated after surrender terms were accepted. The rebellion must be punished first. Negotiations with German princes for the hire of their soldiers were undertaken while the Olive Branch Petition from the Continental Congress was ignored.

Yet there were still some influential Englishmen who asked themselves what long-run value America would have to a mother country that had to hold it by force. These men wanted the bloodshed kept to a minimum and every door to reconciliation kept open. They believed that only a minority of colonials were as yet committed to independence. A majority could still be reconciled with some face-saving reforms in the imperial tax system. To save the empire and return it to good working order required a statesmanship that supported this majority by the prudent use of military force coupled with generous appeals to reason and loyalty.

The Howe brothers were among the advocates of this "soft" policy toward America, and both were members of Parliament. But William, who rarely spoke at all, was thought of primarily as a loyal soldier whose family name and conciliatory disposition fitted him neatly to the requirements for service in Boston in early 1775. He was known to be willing to serve in America despite his

contrary assertions to his Nottingham constituents the year before. And serve he did, starting in February under General Thomas Gage and succeeding him as commander in chief after Bunker Hill later in the year.

Richard, by contrast, was intense, independent, and outspoken. He made enemies. So he saw his younger brother precede him in gaining a position to influence American affairs. Yet what Richard wanted his brother had never asked for, and that was a commission to negotiate peace with the rebels. To get such a commission he had to make himself acceptable above all to one "hard liner" he had not spoken to in seventeen years: Lord George Germain, the new colonial secretary in charge of the war effort. He began by forwarding to Germain letters from brother Sir William in Boston, commenting on them in ways that would show his support of an aggressive campaign in America. Thus Lord Howe separated himself from such other ranking veterans as Sir Jeffrey Amherst and Admiral Augustus Keppel who had declared their unwillingness to fight Americans. Meanwhile, Howe enlisted his influential friends to promote the peace commission idea more directly with the Prime Minister, Lord North.

What followed was a series of compromises engineered by Lord North. In a speech from the throne in late October the king indicated his purpose to send peace commissioners along with troops to America. Then came the Prohibitory Act just before Christmas. In part this was a virtual declaration of war, since it declared a blockade of all the American colonies. But the peace commission idea survived, and Lord Howe knew he was North's choice to become its sole member. Then in January, 1776, Howe accepted the command of the North American naval squadron. That offer had come to him by another route of compromises, but was a widely popular choice when announced. In taking the vice-admiralty, Howe expected to make himself more agreeable to the "hawks" as a peacemaker, for that question still remained unresolved.

Germain was the most stubborn obstacle. He would have preferred no peace commission at all, but in view of commitments made by North and the king, all he could do was to clip its wings. After three months of intermittent

debate, he succeeded. Lord Howe's final instructions were so restrictive compared to his original hopes that only a man of supreme self-confidence could have believed he had a chance to succeed.

It was a point of only minor annoyance that he had been obliged to share the commission with his brother the General, since the two of them saw their mission the same way and William tended to defer to his elder brother anyway. More important, the commissioners were forbidden to reveal the attractive reform plans they brought with them until after a colony or city had restored its royal officials, surrendered its fortifications, and requested through a loyal assembly to be relieved of the Prohibitory Act. Then the commissioners could declare the colony at peace, subject to ratification in London. And only after that could they offer to replace the old system of imperial taxation with a lenient schedule of contributions for defense, or reform the judiciary to strengthen colonial controls over it, or make other concessions. Such strict preliminary conditions meant that only colonists who felt beaten into submission would learn of the generosity of their conquerors. Until then, the commissioners could grant only individual pardons.

Lord Howe set sail from England on May 10, 1776, aboard his flagship *Eagle* for New York, where he would join his brother. Accompanying him were Henry Strachey, his military secretary, and Ambrose Serle, his civilian secretary, both men Germain trusted to keep their admiral on a proper diplomatic course.

Howe was disappointed in his final instructions, but not despondent. Independence had not yet been formally declared. The build-up of the expeditionary force committed to America was impressive, and its force had not yet even been seen, much less felt. As a personal diplomatist, Howe considered himself proven capable by his experience of naval command as well as the advantage of his reputation in America. The name Howe was respected there. The eldest brother of the new commissioners, Lord George Howe, had been killed fighting the French at Fort Ticonderoga in 1758, and in gratitude for his services the citizens of Massachusetts had financed the erection of a monument to his memory in

Westminster Abbey. Ever since then, the Howe brothers had felt a special bond between them and America. As little as they understood the depth of American passions in the present conflict, they sensed the tragedy of it because they had experienced the magnanimity of their fellow Englishmen across the Atlantic as few others could. During the long weeks at sea, Lord Howe must have comforted himself in the conviction that now his family name might be remembered with even greater appreciation, for the opportunity lay with the brothers to save the empire whole.

Meanwhile, the colonists speculated anxiously. George Washington's adjutant general, Colonel Joseph Reed, expressed the apprehensions of many when he wrote his general in March that he was "infinitely more afraid of these commissioners, than of their generals and armies. If their propositions are plausible, and behavior artful, I am apprehensive they will divide us."[1] Americans were by no means united that spring but torn, as one historian wrote, by "anger, fear, hesitation, doubt, disgust, and hope."[2] The debates that led to the Declaration of Independence were becoming strident. Thomas Paine had insisted months earlier in *Common Sense* that "reconciliation is *now* a fallacious dream." Samuel Adams was urging now that "by declaring independence, we put ourselves on a footing for an equal negotiation."[3] Yet John Dickinson, who had drafted the unanswered Olive Branch Petition the previous year, could not make the break at all in 1776. His influential Pennsylvania colleague Robert Morris, who had abstained on the vote for independence and was still unready to sign the Declaration, felt in late July that most Americans would agree to "peace on admissable terms" if the Howes could offer them, and therefore they should be given a hearing. Just as Lord Howe's illusions were supported by his ignorance of American developments, Americans were in the dark as to what Lord Howe was bringing with him.

ON JULY 12 IT BECAME evident that whatever proposals they would make, the Howes would negotiate from a position of strength. The fleet arrived that day off Staten Island 150 ships strong, and it landed 15,000 troops to add to the forces already there under the general's command. The admiral's secretary, Ambrose Serle, noted in his journal that the fleet was "saluted by all the ships in the Harbor, by the Cheers of the sailors all along the Ships, and by those of the Soldiers all along the Shore."[4] Had Serle looked to the other shore he would have seen another line of soldiers gaping quietly at the fleet. General Washington saw them, and the next day scolded his troops for yielding to a "weak curiosity that led some astray from their posts." But the display of imperial power was impressive. One awestruck rifleman who observed the armada from the safety of an outhouse recorded in his journal, "I declare that I thought all London was afloat."[5]

If the carrot and the stick symbolize the two main weapons of politics, the expeditionary force was clearly the stick. The carrot, or such of it as could be revealed from under Howe's restrictive orders, was first sketched on paper during the admiral's nine-week voyage. This was his "Declaration" of June 20, addressed to the govenors of each "colony," as the Howes still called them. The first copy was given to a whaling ship captured and released off the Massachusetts coast. Others were later dispatched from Staten Island, and by July 19 copies were in the hands of Congress.[6]

Lord Howe's covering letter introduced himself as one of the commissioners appointed by his majesty "for restoring peace to his Colonies, and for granting pardons to such of his subjects therein as shall be duly solicitous to benefit by that effect of his gracious indulgence." He asked that the enclosed declaration be promulgated wherever "will render the same of the most public notoriety."[7]

The Declaration itself asserted the power of the Howes to grant individual pardons and, further, "to declare any colony or province, . . .county, port, district, or place, . . .to be at the peace of His Majesty" and thereby exempted from the Prohibitory Act upon the restoration of a loyalist government. "Due consideration," Howe added, would be given "to the meritorious services of all persons who shall aid and assist in restoring the public tranquillity in the said colonies."[8]

New York City newspapers in the last week of July printed the full text with an introduction added by a resolution of Congress recommending that readers learn for themselves "what the terms, with the expectation of which the insidious Court of Britain has endeavored to amuse and disarm them."[9] By the time Lord Howe read this he had been somewhat prepared for a hostile reception by his belated reading of the Americans' own Declaration of July 4. It could only have added to his chagrin to realize that he had arrived too late to make himself heard before that document had been voted upon because he had spent a month back in London arguing to obtain more liberal instructions for his mission.

EVEN BEFORE LEARNING THE REACTION in Congress to his Declaration, Lord Howe made an effort to contact General Washington directly. Washington had anticipated some such moves, and appointed colonels Henry Knox, Joseph Reed, and Samuel Webb as his representatives, with instructions to refuse any correspondence that did not recognize his status as commander in chief of the Continental Army. That proved to be a wise precaution, for on July 14 Howe sent an officer from the *Eagle* over to Manhattan with a letter for Washington proposing a meeting. Colonels Reed and Knox were there to meet his boat, and Knox tells what happened:

> "I have a letter, sir, from Lord Howe to Mr. Washington, [the British officer began.]"
>
> "Sir," says Colonel Reed, "we have no person in our army with that address."
>
> "Sir," says the officer, "will you look at the address?" He took out of his pocket a letter which was thus addressed: "George Washington, Esq., New York."
>
> "No, sir," says Colonel Reed, "I cannot receive that letter."
>
> "I am very sorry," says the officer, "and so will be

> Lord Howe, that any error in the superscription should prevent the letter being received by General Washington."
>
> "Why, sir," says Colonel Reed, "I must obey orders." The British officer departed, but after rowing only a few yards, he stood and asked Colonel Reed by what title Washington preferred to be addressed.
>
> Colonel Reed said, "You are sensible, sir, of the rank of General Washington in our army?"
>
> "Yes, sir, we are. I am sure my Lord Howe will lament exceedingly this affair, as the letter is quite of a civil nature, and not a military one. He laments exceedingly that he was not here a little sooner;" which we suppose to allude to the declaration of independence; upon which we bowed and parted in the most genteel terms imaginable.[10]

Unlike the Howes, Washington regarded his role as exclusively military. His rebuff of Howe's letter drew praise from Congress in a resolution passed July 17 supporting his insistence on recognition of his title.[11] The British reaction was suggested by Ambrose Serle's conclusion that it was "impossible for Lord Howe to give all the Titles which the poor Creature requires."[12]

Nevertheless there was one subject Washington wanted to discuss. He had passed on to the Howes complaints about the treatment of prisoners in Canada. When an officer appeared with an oral request to "General Washington" for an interview with the British adjutant-general, he agreed. On July 20, Lieutenant-Colonel James Patterson came ashore at the Battery and was escorted with some ceremony up to a house at the foot of Broadway where Col. Knox was staying. Passing between a line of alert guards stationed in front of the house to impress him, Patterson was admitted into the presence of a commander in chief uniformed and poised to impress him further. In his hand Patterson held an envelope addressed to "George Washington, Esq., etc., etc.," which was again refused. He paraphrased its contents orally, and the interview proceeded. Knox described it in a letter to his wife:

> In the course of [Patterson's] talk every other word was, "May it please your Excellency," "if your Excellency so pleases;" in short, no person could pay more respect than the said adjutant general.... [Patterson] said the "etc., etc.," implied everything. It does so," said the General "and anything." [Patterson] said Lord and General Howe lamented exceedingly that any errors in the direction should interrupt that frequent intercourse between the two armies which might be necessary in the course of the service. [He said] that Lord Howe had come out with great powers. The General said he had heard that Lord Howe had come out with very great powers to pardon, but he had come to the wrong place; the Americans had not offended, therefore they needed no pardon.... After a considerable deal of talk about the good disposition of Lord and General Howe, [Patterson] asked, "Has your Excellency no particular commands with which you would please to honor me to Lord and General Howe?"
>
> "Nothing, sir, but my particular compliments to both"—a good answer.
>
> General Washington was very handsomely dressed and made a most elegant appearance. Colonel Patterson appeared awestruck, as if he was before something supernatural. Indeed I don't wonder at it. He was before a very great man indeed.[13]

What Washington learned about the treatment of prisoners in Canada was that the Howes had no control over Canada but did have some complaints of their own about prisoners in American hands. So the meeting was a stand-off—a failure in all but saving faces. Next there would be a spending of more lives.

General Howe was not ready to launch an attack in late July. He continued to build up forces and supplies for another month. He also made the final choice of strategic plans which directed the attack toward Long Island. There was nothing inevitable about the choice. Washington was sufficiently sure that an attack would be made on Manhattan or above it that he kept his forces divided even after the action began. Howe had the strength and mobility to launch an encircling movement that would attempt to demolish Washington's army in one decisive action. He could have ignored Long Island until after the river and Westchester were secured. This seems to have been his intention earlier in the year, before Lord Howe and General Clinton arrived to offer their advice. Whether because of their advice or for other reasons, Howe chose

instead to adopt the assumption that no military victory would be final in 1776, and that a gradual reconquest of territory was the better strategy. It would save British lives if a series of easy triumphs could demonstrate British invincibility and demoralize the rebel army. At that point the bulk of the population might be reconciled to submission and ready to accept their place within the empire again. It was fortunate for Washington that the Howes still held to their view that the American rebellion should be ended by persuasion as well as by force—corrected rather than crushed.

After a month's build-up of troops and supplies, General Howe launched his offensive against Long Island. By noon on August 22, 15,000 redcoats had landed unopposed at Gravesend Bay in southern Brooklyn. Three days later they were supplemented by about 5,000 Hessian mercenaries. Naval support was provided by the largest fleet ever seen together at one time in America. Against all this Washington decided he could spare only about 10,000 unseasoned troops in defense of Long Island.

On August 27 the British began their assault on the American positions. General Howe ordered attacks to pin down the American center and right, commanded by Generals John Sullivan and William Alexander ("Lord Sterling") respectively. Meanwhile, he accompanied a long column through the night around the American left flank to where it was undefended at the Jamaica pass. Nearly 9,500 British slipped through unchallanged and forced the nearly surrounded Americans back to their last line at Brooklyn Heights with heavy casualties. Instead of storming the redoubts there, Howe ordered a halt for the digging of siege approaches. Lord Howe, meanwhile, refrained from ordering warships up the East River to bombard or even observe the enemy until a contrary wind foreclosed the opportunity. Given time to assess his predicament and improve it, Washington ordered a withdrawal to Manhattan. It was accomplished over the night of August 29-30 in a fog and calm waters without the British knowing what was happening until morning, when only three stragglers remained.

Among those captured by the British were generals Sullivan and Alexander. Taken aboard the flagship *Eagle*, they were treated to dinner and a lecture by Lord Howe. The admiral's peace mission had been misunderstood and underestimated, he insisted, for his powers to negotiate exceeded the specifications of the Prohibitory Act. Howe was never known as an effective speaker, but his earnestness got through to Sullivan. The admiral got him to carry his message to Congress. When Sullivan and Alexander were released on parole, Washington reluctantly consented, and by September 2 Sullivan was in Philadelphia addressing the Continental Congress.

Sullivan told the members that while Lord Howe could not meet directly with them, "he desired to confer with some of its members, whom he would regard as private gentlemen, and meet at any place they might appoint." Lord Howe, Sullivan continued, "had full powers to arrange an accommodation on terms advantageous to both countries, the obtaining of which had detained [him] in England two months. . .," and if the Americans were willing to confer with the Howes, "many things which they had not yet even asked might and ought to be granted them, and the authority of Congress itself recognized."[14]

This message was by far the most promising description of the peace commission's powers Congress had yet heard. The conservatives became optimistic over the chances for a peaceful settlement; the radicals considered it as only another British ploy to divide American sentiment. Benjamin Rush, who sat next to John Adams during Sullivan's speech, recalled that Adams whispered to him that he wished "the first ball that had been fired on the day of [the Battle of Long Island]. . .had gone through his head." Adams later denounced the proposed conference, referring to Sullivan as a "decoy duck whom Lord Howe has sent among us to seduce us into a renunciation of our independence."[15] Adams afterward insisted, according to his biographer, "that the overture should be permitted to pass wholly without notice."[16]

Others expressed concern that news of possible negotiation might hamper American efforts to secure European allies. The military also stood to suffer since potential recruits, in one historian's words, might feel

"that their was no use walking for miles if they were to find the quarrel ended when they arrived at army headquarters."[17]

More moderate spokesmen felt that the conference would force the British to face up to the fundamental issues over which the war was being fought. Congress, they said, had a duty to explore all possible means of ending the war favorably. Such a conference, they held, would also dispel the loyalists' claims that Congress was prolonging the war needlessly.

On Thursday, September 5, Congress accepted the recommendations of a "Board of War" headed by John Adams, and instructed Sullivan to inform Howe that Congress, ever desirous of establishing peace on reasonable terms, would send a committee to learn "whether he has any authority to treat with persons authorized by Congress for that purpose, in behalf of America, and what that authority is, and to make such propositions as he shall think fit to make respecting the same."[18]

This decision satisfied the conservatives. Congress appeased the radicals by further resolving that General Washington be directed to receive no peace offers from the enemy "unless the same be made in writing and addressed to the representatives of the [United] States in Congress. . .," and that if the British were to make any proposals, "that he inform them that these United States, which entered into the war only for the defence of their lives and liberties, will cheerfully agree to peace on reasonable terms. . . ."[19]

The Continental Congress had assented to a conference, but not on Lord Howe's condition that the representatives attend as private citizens. Instead they would attend in their public capacity as authorized agents of Congress and of the independent states it represented.

The committee to meet with Lord Howe needed the most distinguished of men, preferably from different sections of the country. Congress decided to send a committee of three. The first ballot saw Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania and John Adams of Massachusetts elected unanimously, with Edward Rutledge of South Carolina chosen on the second ballot over Richard Henry Lee.

John Adams was reluctant to serve, and even requested to be excused. Although he finally yielded to pressure from his colleagues, he expressed his pessimism in a letter to his wife:

> All the stanch and intrepid are very ernest with me to go, and the timid and wavering, if any such there are, agree in the request. So I believe I shall undertake the journey. I doubt whether his lordship shall see us, but the same committee shall be directed to inquire into the state of the army at New York, so that there will be business enough, if his lordship makes none.[20]

Two days later, Adams wrote James Warren that he was willing to listen to Howe's proposals, but that he had no intention to beg a pardon.[21]

Neither Adams nor Rutledge had met Lord Howe. Franklin, however, had been well acquainted with him since their first meeting in London in 1774. They had worked together before to find terms for a reconciliation.

The face of Edward Rutledge of South Carolina is less familiar than those of his elder colleagues Adams and Franklin. Although only 27 at the time, he was counted a conservative in Congress. This later engraving is reproduced courtesy of the New York Public Library.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN FIRST MET Lord Howe while representing the American colonies before Parliament in late 1774. Howe's sister, Miss Caroline Howe, had learned of Franklin's skill at chess and invited him for a match at her London home on Grafton Street. The first meeting was so cordial that they arranged another, and after a few more visits the small talk of previous conversations turned to a discussion of colonial issues. Franklin recollected this dialogue in an account written later:

> [Miss Howe:] And what is to be done with this dispute between Great Britain and her colonies? I hope we are not to have civil war.
>
> [Dr. Franklin:] They should kiss and be friends; what can they do better?
>
> [Miss Howe:] I have often said that I wished government would employ you to settle the dispute for 'em; I am sure nobody could do it so well. Do not you think that the thing is practicable?
>
> [Dr. Franklin:] Undoubtedly, madam, if the parties are disposed to reconciliation; for the two countries have really no clashing interests to differ about. "Tis rather a matter of punctilio which two or three reasonable people might settle in half an hour. I thank you for the good opinion you are pleased to express to me; but the ministers will never think of employing me in that good work: they choose rather to abuse me.
>
> [Miss Howe:] Ay, they have behaved shamefully to you. And indeed some of them are now ashamed of it themselves.[22]

On the evening of Christmas day of 1774, following another visit with Miss Howe, Franklin finally met her brother, Lord Richard Howe. Expressing concern for the colonial situation, Howe offered to serve as liaison between Franklin and the British ministry. His offer was appreciated, as many Britons held the Pennsylvanian "rebel" in low esteem. Franklin wrote encouragingly of Howe that "his manner was such as had already engaged my confidence and would make me perfectly easy and free in communicating myself to him."[23]

Franklin had just completed itemizing colonial grievances and proposed remedies in a seventeen-point document entitled "Hints for Conversation upon the Subject of Terms that Might Probably Produce a Durable

Union...." His proposals included repeal ot the Tea Act, an end to the quartering of troops in the colonies without consent of the colonial legislatures, payment of salaries of governors, judges, and customs officials by the colonial legislatures, and "all powers of internal legislation in the colonies to be disclaimed by Parliament."[24] Howe had read "Hints" and, while agreeing with much of it, urged Franklin to draft a more moderate plan. The two men parted and agreed to meet three days later.

The second meeting was again held at Miss Howe's home, where Lord Howe hinted at the possibility of sending a "peace commission" to the colonies which would "inquire into the grievances of America upon the spot, converse with leading people, and endeavor with them to agree upon some means of composing our differences." When Franklin suggested that "a person of rank and dignity" with "a character of candour, integrity, and wisdom" might be chosen for the task, Miss Howe responded: "I wish, Brother, you were to be sent thither on such a service; I should like that much better than General Howe's going to command the army there."

Franklin crisply interjected, "I think, madam, they ought to provide for General Howe some more honorable employment."[25]

Howe quickly changed the subject, however, and began to question Franklin on his "Hints." While again saying that the proposals were unacceptable, Howe cautiously remarked that Franklin's assistance in solving the colonial dispute would be of "infinite service," adding that Franklin "might with reason expect any reward in the power of government to bestow." Startled at this thinly-veiled attempt to bribe him, Franklin gracefully rejected this offer, and later referred to it as "what the French vulgarly call 'spitting in the soup.' "[26]

Nonetheless, Franklin drew up a somewhat softer version of his "Hints" for Howe to pass on to the ministry. On January 19, 1775, Howe informed him that these new proposals were unacceptable, and hinted that Franklin had the power to make even greater concessions. The American assured him that this was not the case, but that he was open to a counterproposal.

The two again met on February 18. Howe told

Franklin that the ministry had considered him "to be sent commissioner for settling the differences in America. . .," and, Franklin recalled, that "He could not think of undertaking it without me. . . ." Franklin was honored by this offer, his only reservation being that any proposals made to the colonies must be "reasonable ones in themselves" and that Howe show them to him in advance. "If I approve them," Franklin told Howe, "I shall not hesitate for a moment, but will hold myself to accompany your Lordship at an hour's warning."[27]

Franklin actually expected little of his proposed peace mission, and what hopes he had were dashed when he learned a short time later of the death of his wife in Philadelphia. Franklin nevertheless offered to delay his return to America in order to accompany Howe should the peace mission materialize. By mid-March, however, the ministry had not approved the mission, and Franklin sailed for America after one more inconclusive interview with Lord Howe. If Howe were eventually to be sent to America to make peace, Franklin wrote, "he hoped that he might still expect my assistance. I assured him of my readiness at all times in co-operating with him in so good a work. . . .[28]

Neither man could know then how far apart events would pull them by the time they next exchanged views over a year later. Lord Howe renewed the contact in a letter dated June 20, 1776 while enroute to New York. In it he maintained "all the Earnestness I have ever expressed to see our differences accommodated." But "if the deep-rooted Prejudices of America, and the Necessity for preventing her Trade from passing into foreign Channels, must keep us still a divided People, I shall from every private as well as public Motive, most heartily lament, that this is not the Moment wherein those great Objects of my Ambition are to be attained."[29]

Franklin replied on July 30. He had read Howe's Declaration of June 20 and regarded it as "nothing more than what we had seen in the Act of Parliament [the Prohibitory Act], viz, offers of Pardon upon Submission, which I was sorry to find as it must give your Lordship Pain to be sent upon so fruitless a business."

Then Franklin began to wind up his rhetoric until it

sounded like a paraphrase of the Declaration of Independence. Capitulation would be unthinkable to a

> Government, that has with the most wanton Barbarity and cruelty burnt our defenseless Towns in the midst of Winter, excited the Savages to massacre our Peaceful Farmers, and our Slaves to murder their Masters, and is even now bringing foreign Mercenaries to deluge our Settlements with Blood. These atrocious Injuries have extinguished every remaining Spark of Affection for that Parent Country we once held so dear.

Only "by repairing as far as possible the mischiefs done us" could Britain "yet recover a great Share of our Regard," although this was unlikely, Franklin continued, as her "Fondness for Conquest, as a warlike Nation, her lust for Dominion, as an ambitious one, and her wish for a gainful Monopoly, as a commercial One (none of them legitimate causes of war,) will all join to hide from her Eyes every view of her true Interests. . . ." Franklin praised Howe's motives in undertaking the mission, and concluded with the hope that when he found success "impossible on any Terms given you to propose, you will relinquish so odious a Command, and return to a more honorable private Station."[30]

Howe acknowledged in his reply "that the powers I am invested with were never calculated to negotiate a reunion with America, under any other description than as subject to the crown of Great Britain," although he felt these powers to be sufficient for an agreement "of mutual interest to both countries," which could alone render it permanent."[31]

Franklin's reply, sent September 8, had been delayed "because I found that my corresponding with your Lordship was disliked by some members of Congress." He advanced no further arguments, but merely informed Howe of the committee chosen by Congress to meet with him, and their plans to depart Philadelphia on September 9 and arrive at Amboy, New Jersey, on the 11th. He suggested that the conference take place "either at the house on Staten Island opposite to Amboy, or at the governor's house in Amboy. . . ."[32] Howe chose the house on Staten Island in his reply two days later, and arranged for a boat to carry the three Americans across

the Arthur Kill from Amboy to the conference site.

The time and place of the conference now established, all that remained was for the American delegation to make the ninety-mile journey to Amboy.

ON MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Edward Rutledge embarked on their journey to confer with Howe. Dr. Franklin, who at seventy was the oldest member of Congress, had to be borne the entire distance in a chair. Adams recalled seeing "such Numbers of Officers and Soldiers, straggling and loitering, as gave me, at least, but a poor Opinion of the Discipline of our forces, and excited as much indignation as anxiety. Such thoughtless dissipation, at a time so critical, was not calculated to inspire very sanguine hopes, or give great Courage to Ambassadors. I was nevertheless, determined that it should not dishearten me."[33]

The three delegates found the inns crowded with American troops on their way to the battlefront in New York and finally obtained lodging at New Brunswick, New Jersey, although Franklin and Adams had to share a double bed in a cramped garret chamber.[34]

Staten Island, their ultimate destination, was heavily loyalist. Its citizens had been reluctant to send delegates to the Provincial Congress, and New Jersey had suspended relations with the island for its lack of support of the American cause. Finally, the thousands of British troops stationed there assured the island's allegiance to the king.

As arranged, the Americans met Lord Howe's red and gilt barge at the foot of Smith Street in Amboy on the morning of September 11. Howe had sent an officer over with the barge to serve as a hostage for their security, but the delegates declined this gesture and asked the officer to return to the island with them.

Lord Howe had asked his brother, General Sir William Howe, to leave Staten Island while the conference took place, despite his equal status as a peace commissioner. Lord Howe's concern was over his brother's much publicized affair with Mrs. Elizabeth Lloyd Loring, the wife of General Howe's own commissary adjutant, Major

Joshua Loring. Howe met Mrs. Loring while commanding the British forces in Boston, and both shared tastes for gambling, drink, and amorous pleasures. Their relationship was no secret, judging by a satirical ballad of the time:

> Sir William, he, as snug as a flea,
> Lay all this time a-snoring,
> Nor dreamed of harm, as he lay warm
> In bed with Mrs. Loring.[35]

William Howe agreed to leave, and his brother greeted the Americans as the sole British peace negotiator. He noticed that the Americans had brought the British officer designated as a hostage with them. "Gentlemen," Lord Howe exclaimed, "you make me a very high compliment, and. . .I will consider it as the most sacred of things."[36]

He then escorted his guests up the one hundred foot walk to Billop Manor House. As John Adams would retell it later:

> We walked up to the house between lines of guards of grenadiers, looking fierce as ten Furies, and making all the grimaces, and gestures, and motions of their muskets, with bayonets fixed, which, I suppose, military etiquette requires, but which we neither understood nor regarded.[37]

The Billop House, where the conference was to be held, was built between 1668 and 1680 by Christopher Billop, a British navy captain, with materials shipped from Holland. At the time of the conference the house served as a billet for British guards. Adams wrote that it "was as dirty as a stable," although he noted that Howe "had prepared a large handsome Room, by spreading a Carpet of Moss and green Spriggs. . .till he had made it not only wholesome, but romantically elegant. . . ." Following a half-hour lunch of "good Claret, good Bread, cold Ham, Tongues, and Mutton,"[38] the table was cleared and the conference began.

Lord Howe opened the conference by restating his long-held hope that a peaceful reconciliation could be achieved "to the satisfaction of both" parties. Recalling the tribute paid to his slain brother, Lord George Howe, by the American people, Howe said: "I feel for America as a brother, and if America should fall, I should feel and lament it like the loss of a brother."[39]

"My lord," Franklin replied, "we will use our utmost

endeavor to save your lordship that mortification."

Howe then told of his efforts to be sent to America to bring peace, and of his objections to the ministry's plan to send several peace negotiators to the colonies. "I objected even to my brother's being in the commission, from the delicacy of the employment, and from my desire to take upon myself all the reproach that might be the consequence." Howe considered the Olive Branch Petition of 1775 to be a clear signal that reconciliation was within his power, and was therefore disappointed to learn of the passage of the Declaration of Independence a few days before his arrival in New York. "That act, gentlemen, precludes all treaty making, for. . .I have not, nor do I ever expect to have, power to consider the Colonies in the light of independent States." Therefore, Howe concluded, he could only recognize the American delegates as "gentlemen of great ability and influence in the country."

"Your lordship may consider us in any view you think proper," Franklin responded. "We on our part are at liberty to consider ourselves in our real character."

John Adams was not as conciliatory; "Indeed, I shall be willing to consider myself for a few moments in any character which would be agreeable to your lordship, except that of a British subject."

"Mr. Adams is a decided character," Howe replied.

Rutledge concurred with Franklin, proposing "that the conversation may be as among friends."

Howe then summarized the situation as he saw it, and concluded by saying that his own powers were limited: "to restore peace and grant pardons, to attend to complaints and representations, and to confer upon the means to a reunion upon terms honorable and advantageous to the Colonies and to Great Britain. You know, gentlemen, that we expect aid from America; our dispute seems only to be concerning the mode of obtaining."

"Aid we never refuse upon requisition," answered Franklin.

"Your money, let me assure you," said Howe, "is the smallest consideration. America can confer upon Great Britain more solid advantages; it is her commerce, her strength, her men, that we chiefly want."

"Ay, my lord," responded Franklin, "we have in America a pretty considerable manufactory of men."

Howe then posed the central question: could American independence be sidestepped, "thus opening the door to a full discussion?"

Franklin told Howe that Congress had directed the delegation "to inquire what authority your lordship bears and what propositions you have to offer for the consideration of Congress." Americans had viewed the act of Parliament which had both created Howe's peace commission and ordered the seizure of all vessels trading with the colonies to be the king's answer to the "Olive Branch Petition." "America cannot return to the domination of Great Britain," Franklin continued, "and I imagine that Great Britain means to rest it upon force."

Adams reminded Howe that Congress alone had not declared independence, but that it "had been instructed to do so by all the Colonies." Therefore, the committee had no power "to treat otherwise than as independent States; and for my own part I avow my determination never to depart from the idea of independency."

Rutledge proposed that Britain allow the American colonies to become independent and then form an alliance with them. "England may still enjoy a great share of the American commerce, and so procure raw materials for her manufacturers." America could protect the West Indies and the Newfoundland fisheries far more easily than could Britain, Rutledge continued, "while the products of both the West Indies and Newfoundland would continue to enrich the merchants of England." Regarding a return to British rule, Rutledge responded by citing the abuses of British officials in South Carolina. "At last we took the government into our own hands, and the people are now settled and happy under the government. They would not, even if the Congress should desire it, return to the king's government."

Howe regretted that such views left him without any power. "If the Colonies will not give up the system of independency, it is impossible for me to enter into any negotiation." When Franklin suggested that he return to London to obtain more liberal powers, Howe said he considered it "vain" to expect the ministry to concede

American independence.

"Well, my Lord," said Franklin after a pause, "as America is to expect nothing but upon unconditional submission. . . ."

"No, Dr. Franklin," Howe interrupted, "Great Britain does not require unconditional submission. I think that what I have already said proves the contrary; and I desire, gentlemen, that you will not go away with such an idea."

Franklin then asked if the delegation might submit written proposals to Howe for submission to the ministry. While Howe "could [not] avoid receiving any papers" from the Americans, "I am doubtful of the propriety of transmitting them home. Still, I do not say that I would decline doing so."

The three hour conference came to an end. Lord Howe politely attended the Americans to his barge. After the short row back to the New Jersey shore, the three delegates began their return to Philadelphia to report the events of the day to Congress.

Lord Howe had asked his brother to desist from military action while the conference was pending. With the meeting a clear failure, General Howe again took the initiative on September 15 by landing at Kip's Bay on eastern Manhattan and engaging the Continentals at

Desk used by Lord Howe is among furnishings exhibited at the Conference House. See also illustrations inside back cover.

Harlem Heights on the following day. The Howe brothers now saw that only military force would put the rebellion down.

The Staten Island peace conference was the last official meeting on political issues between Britain and her American colonies. After September 11, 1776, Britain would have to recognize the "independency" of the American nation if she wanted to talk politics.

EDWARD RUTLEDGE WAS THE FIRST member of of the American delegation to report his impressions of the conference. In a letter to George Washington written from New Brunswick a few hours after the meeting ended, Rutledge informed the general "that our conference with Lord Howe has been attended with no immediate advantages." Howe had told them, he said, that he had no power to consider them as independent states, and thus "our reliance continues. . .to be, under God, on your wisdom and fortitude, and that of your forces; that you may be as successful as I know you are worthy, is my most sincere wish."[40]

From the British viewpoint two days later, Ambrose Serle expressed similar feelings over the failure of the conference:

> From the Complexion of the agents, it was easy to forsee what would be the Event of the Business. They met, they talked, they parted. And now, nothing remains but to fight it out against a Set of the most determined Hypocrites & Demagogues, compiled of the Refuse of the Colonies, that ever were permitted by Providence to be the Scourge of a Country.[41]

John Adams wrote to his wife on September 14 that Lord Howe's diplomatic tact was "not so irresistable as it has been represented," and that he knew of "many *Americans,* in your own neighborhood, whose art, address, and ability are greatly superior. His head is rather confused I think."[42] On September 17, he further derided the conference in a letter to his cousin Samuel Adams: "The whole affair of the commission appears to me, as it ever did, to be a bubble, an ambuscade. . .and it

is so gross, that they must have a wretched opinion of our generalship to suppose that we can fall into it."[43] Samuel Adams replied that the delegates maintained "the Dignity of Congress, and in my Opinion, the Independence of America stands now on a better footing than it did before."[44]

Benjamin Rush, another radical, believed that the conference "produced a secession of Tories and timid Whigs from the Councils of the United States."[45] Rush's analysis was correct; the Staten Island conference was a defeat for the loyalists. They believed that Lord Howe had been given broad powers to effect a reconciliation, and they were clearly proven wrong.

Benjamin Franklin reserved his comments for the written report submitted to Congress on September 17. The report reiterated Howe's points and the delegates' response to them. Lord Howe, they said, only tried to assure them "that there was an exceeding good disposition in the king and his ministers to make that government easy to us, with intimations that, in case of our submission, they would cause the offensive acts of Parliament to be revised...." The best Howe could do, the report continued, was to ask the North ministry to reconsider the acts that had brought about the war. "We apprehended any expectation from the effect of such a power," the report concluded, "would have been too uncertain and precarious to be relied on by America, had she still continued in her state of Dependence."[46]

Lord Howe, not anxious to inform the Home Office of his failure, delayed his written report to Lord Germain until September 20. Howe told Germain of the capture of Sullivan, the American general's message to Congress, and the meeting on Staten Island. He said that he tried to impress upon the Americans "The King's desire to restore the public tranquility and to render his American subjects happy in a permanent union with Great Britain...," and that he tried to persuade them that the king "was graciously disposed to a revision" of his instructions to the colonial governors and of any legislation "by which the colonists might be aggrieved." The delegates refused to accept these considerations, Howe wrote, and only proposed an unacceptable plan

of independence and alliance with Britain. "Their arguments not meriting a serious attention," Howe concluded, "The conversation ended, and the gentlemen returned to Amboy."[47]

Howe issued written appeals to the public for reconciliation on September 19 and November 30. The September 19 circular sought to bypass Congress, "whom the misguided Americans suffer to direct their Opposition to a Re-establishment of the constitutional government of these Provinces...," and sought to influence "his Majesty's well-affected Subjects...." Suggesting that the king would be "most graciously disposed to direct Revision of his Royal Instructions...and to concur in the Reversal of all Acts by which his Subjects...may think themselves aggrieved...," Howe declared that Americans could either "offer up their Lives as a Sacrifice to the unjust and precarious Cause in which they are engaged," or "return to their Allegiance, accept the Blessings of Peace, and be secured in a free Enjoyment of their Liberay [sic] and Proprieties, upon the true Principles of the Constitution."[48]

Howe, in issuing these declarations, hoped to secure a reconciliation based on loyalist support. But many loyalists felt that Howe had been too lenient toward the rebels; that he should have followed up the Battle of Long Island with further military action, not a peace conference. Sir George Collier was angered at seeing "the rebels' standards wav[ing] insolently in the air" over Continental positions on Manhattan. "The British troops could scarcely contain their indignation at the sight and at their own *inactivity;* the officers were *displeased and amazed,* not being able to account for the strange delay."[49]

Thomas Jones, a loyalist historian bitterly critical of the Howes, wrote: "...a different set of politics at this time prevailed, the rebels were to be converted, the loyalists frowned upon. Proclamations were to end an inveterate rebellion."[50]

The British ministry in London was also irritated at the Howe brothers' hesitation to use the full military power under their command. Thomas Hutchinson, former colonial governor of Massachusetts Bay, recorded

in his diary that when the news of the peace efforts reached London, "Lord Townshend called in a perfect rage, and hint[ed] that [the Howes] may make what agreement they will, but Parliament must finally approve it."[51]

The Howe brothers' peace commission had obtained unity in one respect: it was hated and criticized by all!

For all their good intentions, the Howe brothers had failed in their efforts to secure a peaceful reconciliation between Great Britain and her American colonies. To Charles Francis Adams, John Adams' grandson and biographer, Lord Howe had seen the American Revolution "merely as a quarrel in the family, where he might come in as intercessor, and beg the father not to be hard upon the children, provided he could persuade them, in their turn, to pray forgiveness and promise amendment. All this kind of reasoning, if it ever could have had any force, was utterly thrown away after the Fourth of July."[52]

Neither the carrot nor the stick, separately or together, would bring peace in 1776, The Staten Island peace conference proved that no matter how badly demoralized Washington's troops were following their defeat on Long Island, neither Washington nor the leadership in Congress would budge from their determination to make independence a reality in America. It proved to American tories and fence-sitters that Lord North could not deliver them from war by offering realistic terms. And it proved to the Howes and those they represented in England that their dream of a reconciled empire was over.

As if to remind the world that its Declaration of July was not regretted in September, the Congress on September 9—the same day its committee departed for Staten Island—had passed this resolution: "Resolved: That in all continental commissions, and other instruments, where, heretofore, the words 'United Colonies' have been used, the stile be altered, for the future, to the United States."[53]

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THE CONFERENCE HOUSE was nearly a hundred years old at the time of the historic meeting there in 1776. It was built by the original Christopher Billop, who had been granted 932 acres by colonial governor Edmund Andros in 1676. Billop's great grandson and namesake inherited the property in 1750. This Christopher Billop was a member of the colonial assembly who took the loyalist side and served as a colonel in the Tory militia during the Revolution. Knowing that his property would be confiscated after the British evacuation of New York in 1783, he fled north to St. Johns, New Brunswick, with other refugee loyalists. There the British government reimbursed him for some of his wartime losses and he lived until 1827 as a local merchant and political leader.

Nearly a century and a half passed before the site of America's first peace conference passed from private ownership into the care of a group dedicated to its restoration. In September of 1925 the newly formed Conference House Association began its continuing work of restoring, preserving, and opening the house to the public.

Now a National Landmark, the Conference or Billop House has been called by the New York City Landmarks Commission "the most imposing surviving seventeenth-century manor house on Staten Island. . . . A magnificent two and one-half story fieldstone residence, constructed between 1680 and 1688, . . . the house is rectangular in plan with centrally designed hall and an attic of immense dimensions. The stone masonry, impressively bold in its appearance, is characteristic of the medieval influence on some of our early colonial architecture."

The Conference House is located in Tottenville at the southwestern tip of Staten Island. It is at the southern end of Hyland Boulevard near the intersection of Arthur Kill Road. The house is presently open to the public Tuesdays through Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m.

Front view above courtesy of Staten Island Historical Society.

Below: a view of the restored front parlor, where the conference is believed to have taken place.