

= Staten Island Peace Conference =

The Staten Island Peace Conference was a brief meeting held in the hope of bringing an end to the American Revolutionary War . The conference took place on September 11 , 1776 , at Billop Manor , the residence of Colonel Christopher Billop , on Staten Island , New York . The participants were the British Admiral Lord Richard Howe , and members of the Second Continental Congress John Adams , Benjamin Franklin , and Edward Rutledge .

Since Lord Howe 's authority was , by design , extremely limited , the Congressional delegation was pessimistic about the meeting 's outcome . The conference , held in the days after the British capture of Long Island , lasted just three hours and was a failure . The Americans insisted on recognition of their recently declared independence , and Howe 's limited authority was inadequate to deal with that development . After the conference , the British continued their military campaign for control of New York City .

= = Background = =

When British authorities were planning how to deal with their rebellious North American colonies in late 1775 and early 1776 , they decided to send a large military expedition to occupy New York City . Two brothers , Admiral Lord Richard Howe and General William Howe , were given command of the naval and land aspects of the operation respectively . Since they believed it might still be possible to end the dispute without further violence , the Howe brothers insisted on being granted diplomatic powers in addition to their military roles . Admiral Howe had previously discussed colonial grievances informally with Benjamin Franklin in 1774 and 1775 , without resolution . General Howe believed that the problem of colonial taxation could be resolved while retaining the supremacy of Parliament . At first King George III reluctantly agreed to grant the Howes limited powers , but Lord George Germain took a harder line , and insisted that the Howes not be given any powers that might be seen as giving in to the colonial demands for relief from taxation without representation or the so @-@ called Intolerable Acts . As a consequence , the Howes were only granted the ability to issue pardons and amnesties , but not to make any substantive concessions . The commissioners were also mandated to seek dissolution of the Continental Congress , re @-@ establishment of the pre @-@ war colonial assemblies , acceptance of the terms of Lord North 's Conciliatory Resolution regarding self @-@ taxation , and to promise a further discussion of colonial grievances . No concessions could be made unless hostilities were ended and colonial assemblies made specific admissions of Parliamentary supremacy .

After the fleet arrived in July 1776 , Admiral Howe made several attempts to open communications with Continental Army General George Washington . Two attempts to deliver letters to Washington were rebuffed because Howe refused to recognize Washington 's title . Washington did however agree to meet in person with one of Howe 's adjutants , Colonel James Patterson . In the meeting on July 20 , Washington learned that the Howes ' diplomatic powers were essentially limited to the granting of pardons , to which he responded that the Americans had not committed any faults and thus did not need pardons . Lord Howe then sent a letter to Benjamin Franklin detailing a proposal for a truce and offers of pardons . After Franklin read the letter in Congress on July 30 , he wrote back to the admiral that " Directing pardons to be offered to the colonies , who are the very parties injured , [ ... ] can have no other effect than that of increasing our resentments . It is impossible we should think of submission to a government that has with the most wanton barbarity and cruelty burnt our defenseless town , [ ... ] 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 . " He also pointed out to the admiral that " you once gave me expectations that reconciliation might take place . " Howe was apparently somewhat taken aback by Franklin 's forceful response .

In the Battle of Long Island on August 27 , 1776 , British forces successfully occupied western Long Island ( modern Brooklyn ) , compelling Washington to withdraw his army to Manhattan . General Howe then paused to consolidate his gains , and the brothers decided to make a diplomatic overture

. During the battle they had captured several high @-@ ranking Continental Army officers , including Major General John Sullivan . The Howes managed to convince Sullivan that a conference with members of the Continental Congress might yield fruit , and released him on parole to deliver a message to the Congress in Philadelphia , proposing an informal meeting to discuss ending the armed conflict between Britain and its rebellious colonies . After Sullivan 's speech to Congress , John Adams cynically commented on this diplomatic attempt , calling Sullivan a " decoy @-@ duck " and accusing the British of sending Sullivan " to seduce us into a renunciation of our independence " ; others noted that it appeared to be an attempt to blame Congress for prolonging the war . The Congress did however agree to send three of its members ? Adams , Benjamin Franklin and Edward Rutledge ? to a conference with Lord Howe . They were instructed " to ask a few Questions and take [ Howe 's ] Answers " , but had no further authority . When Howe learned of the committee 's limited authority , he briefly considered calling the meeting off , but decided to proceed after discussion with his brother . None of the commissioners believed the conference would amount to anything .

Lord Howe initially sought to meet with the men as private citizens , since British policy did not recognize the Congress as a legitimate authority . In order that the conference might take place , he agreed to the American demand that they be recognized as official representatives of the Congress .

= = Meeting = =

The house of Christopher Billop on Staten Island was selected to be the meeting place . It had been occupied by British troops for use as a barracks and was in filthy condition , but one room was cleaned and prepared for the meeting . The arrangements included one British officer to be left on the American side as a hostage during the meeting ; the Congressional delegation , rather than leaving him behind the American lines , invited him to accompany them . On arrival , the delegation was escorted past a line of Hessian soldiers and into the house , where , according to Adams , a repast of claret , ham , mutton , and tongue was served .

The meeting lasted three hours , and the two sides were unable to find any common ground . The Americans insisted that any negotiations required British recognition of their recently declared independence . Lord Howe stated he did not have the authority to meet that demand . When asked by Edward Rutledge whether he had the authority to repeal the Prohibitory Act ( which authorized a naval blockade of the colonies ) as had been claimed by Sullivan , Howe demurred , claiming Sullivan was mistaken . Howe 's authority included the ability to suspend its execution , provided the colonies agreed to make fixed contributions instead of the taxes Parliament had levied on them . None of this could be done unless the colonies first agreed to end hostilities .

For most of the meeting , both sides were cordial . But when Lord Howe expressed that he would feel America 's loss " like the loss of a brother " , Franklin informed him that " we will do our utmost endeavors to save your lordship that mortification . " Lord Howe unhappily stated he could not view the American delegates as anything but British subjects , to which Adams replied , " Your lordship may consider me in what light you please , [ ... ] except that of a British subject . " Lord Howe then spoke past Adams to Franklin and Rutledge , stating , " Mr. Adams appears to be a decided character . "

= = Effects = =

The Congressmen returned to Philadelphia and reported that Lord Howe " has no propositions to make us " and that " America is to expect nothing but total unconditional submission . " John Adams learned many years later that his name was on a list of people specifically excluded from any pardon offers the Howes might make . Congress published the committee 's report without comment . Because Lord Howe did not also publish an account of the meeting , the meeting 's outcome was perceived by many as a sign of British weakness ; however , many Loyalists and some British observers suspected the Congressional report misrepresented the meeting . One British

commentator wrote of the meeting , " They met , they talked , they parted . And now nothing remains but to fight it out . " Lord Howe reported the failure of the conference to his brother , and they then made preparations to continue the campaign for New York City . Four days after the conference , British troops landed on Manhattan and occupied New York City .

Parliamentary debate over the terms of the diplomatic mission and its actions prompted some opposition ( Whig ) members to essentially boycott Parliamentary proceedings . The next major peace effort occurred in 1778 , when the British sent commissioners led by the Earl of Carlisle to occupied Philadelphia . They were authorized to treat with Congress as a body , and offered self @-@ government that was roughly equivalent to Dominion status . This effort was undermined by the planned withdrawal of British troops from Philadelphia and by American demands that the commissioners were not authorized to grant .

The house where the conference took place is now preserved as a museum within Conference House Park , a city park . It is a National Historic Landmark , and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places .