

Orange County's Committees of Safety

From William H.B. Thomas's book entitled *Orange, Virginia, Story of a Courthouse Town* and Frank Walker's book, *Remembering*:

During the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in the summer of 1744, delegates banned trade with Britain and formed "Committees of Safety" throughout the colonies to monitor compliance and expose those not supporting the ban. These Committees were an outgrowth of the Committees of Correspondence throughout the Colony and provided an organized system of governance.

"During the years of the Revolution several Committees of Safety wound up being the only form of government functioning in their localities. Orange County, however, maintained both an active court and a working Sheriff during that time. While there were militia companies and citizen patrols operating in the county from time to time, the Sheriff provided the ongoing law and order presence."¹

"As difficulties between England and her American colonies intensified, committees of safety...communicated, coordinated, and conducted early resistance to the Mother Country.

"On December 22, 1774, the Orange Committee of Safety was elected and held its meetings at Orange Court House. The members were Colonel James Madison, Sr. [father of the president], James Taylor, William Bell, Thomas Barbour, Zachariah Burnley, Rowland Thomas, William Moore, Johnny Scott, James Walker, William Pannill, Francis Moore, James Madison, Jr., Lawrence Taliaferro, Thomas Bell, and Vivian Daniel. Shortly thereafter Colonel Madison was elected chairman and Francis Taylor, clerk.

"Two scenes at Orange Court House reveal the Committee's activities. The Reverend John Wingate, rector of the Brick Church of St. Thomas Parish, was cited for having in his possession 'pamphlets containing very obnoxious reflections on the Continental Congress and their proceedings.'

"Mr. Wingate refused at first to deliver up the documents, but did so upon peremptory demand. The Committee found them to be 'execrable publications' and ordered that they be burned. At the courthouse, the 'sentence was speedily executed in the presence of the Independent Company and other respectable inhabitants' of the county. The Reverend John Wingate departed soon thereafter.

¹ Frank S. Walker, Jr., *Remembering: History of Orange County, Virginia* (Orange: Orange County Historical Society, 2004), 109.

“Two years later, a Frenchman, an officer in the Continental Army, and another person, ‘a man of decent figure,’ came to the courthouse on court day and inquired for a member of the Committee. Several members who were present heard their story.

“On the road coming into the Court House, they said, they had come upon a man ‘who gave abundant proof of his being an adherent to the King of G[reat]. B[ritain]. and a dangerous Enemy of the State.’ They said they could point him out in the crowd at the courthouse. It was one Benjamin Haley of Orange County.²

“The Committee, it was decided, had no jurisdiction in the matter and the affair was referred to a Justice of the Peace. When it seemed that nothing might come of it as the travelers, the witnesses, began to go on their way, Haley got into an argument with the French officer in the presence of twenty or thirty bystanders at the courthouse.

“After claiming that the people were in a ‘State of rebellion and had revolted from our lawful Sovereign,’ Haley was arrested and, upon refusing to give bond for his appearance at court, was clapped into ‘close goal [gaol].’ Five hours later, about one o’clock in the morning, he begged to be admitted to bail and was allowed to go home. Even then, he was ‘making public declaration that he was King George’s man.’

“Haley was later found guilty, fined 12 shillings, and given one hours’ imprisonment. This was milder than the treatment given, and the feelings toward, the Reverend John Wingate. Zeal may have abated in Orange County or Haley may have been considered merely a harmless, obstreperous character.”³

² William H.B. Thomas, *Orange County, Virginia, Story of a Courthouse Town* (Verone, Virginia, McClure Press, 1972, 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.