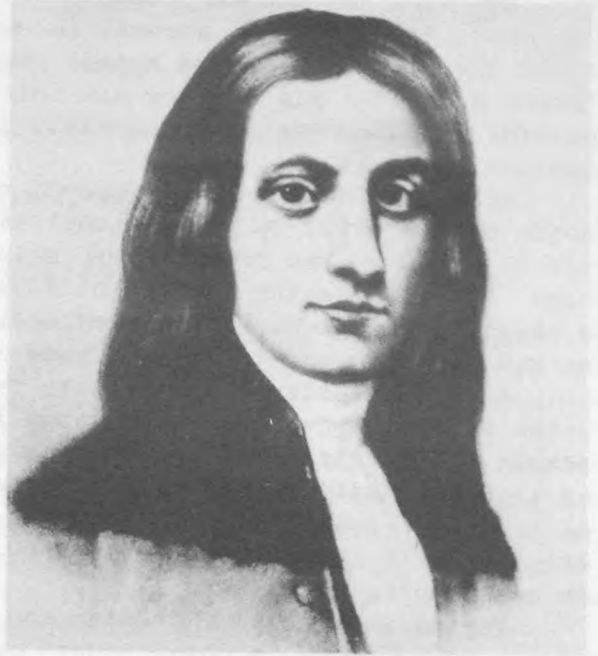


JOHN HART

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 The last royal governor, William Franklin, demanded that the enactment be withdrawn, and the assembly fell in with his wishes.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.