Selfish, Timid, Tories

Boston in the American Revolutionary War, 1776–1777

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Abstract

Historians of the American Revolution have celebrated Boston’s role in early resistance to Britain, while neglecting its post-1776 history. After the British evacuation, pre-existing social and economic problems re-emerged in 1776-77. Trying circumstances caused patriot unity to collapse. The issues of army enlistment and price regulation revealed different ideas among the elite and the laboring classes about the people’s obligations to the American cause. The result was elite patriots moving the public discourse around patriotism in a direction that suited their interests and ensured their positions of power. They accused those who disagreed of a lack of virtue and remaining loyal to Britain. This thesis shows how, for Boston, the Revolution was not a solution.
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Introduction

‘Friends! Brethren! Countrymen!...the hour of Destruction or manly Opposition to the Machinations of Tyranny stares you in the face.’ So declared the handbill calling a Boston town meeting on 29 November 1773. The East India Company’s tea had arrived in Boston Harbor, and the people were to meet to decide how to respond. The ‘whole body of the people’, not just voters, were invited, and all sorts attended. Several thousand people gathered for the two-day meeting. Together, elites and laborers, merchants and artisans, all voted to have the tea ships guarded by the militia, censured Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson, ordered the ships’ owners to send the tea back from where it came, and applauded when merchant John Rowe asked ‘Whether a little Salt Water would not do [the tea] good…’ The meeting seemed to represent the height of a unified patriot resistance. All came together in opposition to the perceived tyranny of Britain.¹

On 24 July 1777, another in a run of food riots broke out in Boston. A number of well-to-do women confronted Thomas Boylston, a noted merchant and, according to the British in 1775, a ‘dangerous patriot.’ The women knew he had a supply of coffee that he was not selling. They wanted to buy it at a price they considered reasonable and sell it on to poor people in their own small shops. Boylston refused to sell the coffee, and the women went away. However, at around three o’clock the same afternoon, a much larger crowd of women, possibly over a hundred, accosted Boylston at a warehouse. Once again they demanded he sell his coffee at a reasonable price. Boylston again refused. The crowd seized him, ‘tossed’ him into a cart, and drove him down the wharf to another warehouse where they demanded his

keys. The women opened the warehouse and took the coffee they wanted, promising all the while they would still pay for the goods.²

This was not the only food riot in Boston in 1777. Boylston was now considered a Tory and worthy of derision. Less than four years after they had united in opposition to Britain’s Tea Act, Boston patriots were attacking each other over necessities. What had changed?

The story of Boston from 1765 to 1775 has received a lot of attention from historians. Whatever interpretation one puts on the origins of the American Revolution, Boston will almost certainly feature. Its resistance to the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts was so fierce the British sent an occupying army into Boston in 1768. This in turn led to famous Revolutionary events like the Boston Massacre, the Tea Party, and the Siege of Boston. The town was also the home of many of the Revolution’s famous figures- John and Sam Adams, John Hancock, Paul Revere- and most prominent villains- Thomas Hutchinson and those thousands of British soldiers. It led much of the resistance movement through its Committee of Correspondence, a form of extralegal government that spread throughout Massachusetts. Finally, there was the Boston Tea Party and the Coercive Acts, the catalyst that helped turn American resistance into the American Revolution.³


Despite this story, and relying heavily on the writings of another woman, Abigail Adams, a dearth of sources means that unfortunately women’s responses to events in Boston in this period are not prominent in this thesis. For the role of women in Boston in the Revolution pre-1776, see Alfred F. Young, Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 100–43.

However, Boston's post-1776 history, after the end of the siege and the evacuation of the town by the British, has been largely overlooked. Superficially, this is understandable; the Revolutionary War and its aftermath were centered elsewhere. Those who have dealt with its post-1776 travails have either looked at the town as part of a broader region, or only concentrated on particular aspects of its history. Yet comprehending Boston’s wartime story beyond the siege is important for two reasons: first, it provides a vital context to its significant role in the 1763–76 period; secondly, it offers an example of how the unity of American patriots began to collapse when, in the process of constructing a new political order amidst economic difficulties, it became clear that patriots had very different ideas about the meaning of patriotism.

The lack of research into Boston is also symptomatic of a wider problem in scholarship of the Revolutionary period (1763–89): a relative dearth of research into the Revolutionary War. Partly, this is a result of the dominant interpretations of the conflict. So-called 'Whig' historians have been especially prevalent in scholarship; they see the core of the Revolution as being the expressed ideas and beliefs of the political leaders of the Founding era. This has led many historians to focus on the development of the intellectual beliefs and formal politics that made these leaders Revolutionaries, and culminated in the creation of the United States Constitution.


4 Hoerder, Crowd Action; Barbara Clark Smith, The Freedoms We Lost: Consent and Resistance in Revolutionary America (New York: The New Press, 2010); Jacqueline Barbara Carr, After the Siege: A Social History of Boston, 1775–1800 (Boston: Northeastern University Publisher, 2005).
However, Whigs have largely chosen to skip the Revolutionary War because they see it as irrelevant to this story. As John Shy has commented, these historians wish to separate the ‘constructive’ story of political revolution and the ‘destructive’ story of the war. The food riot that I opened with, and its context, has not received much attention from these historians.

‘Progressive’ historians see the core energy of the Revolution as coming from the beliefs and actions of non-elite Americans, whether they were laborers, slaves or Native Americans. They have argued that non-elites were at the centre of most of the actual action of the Revolutionary period; therefore, their motivations are key to the conflict. Progressive narratives tend to be more localised because there were a wide variety of non-elite groups who had diverse experiences in the Revolution. The importance of the Revolutionary War to non-elites has meant Progressives have focused more on the conflict than Whigs. However, Progressives have tended to research events in certain hotspots, particularly Pennsylvania, Virginia and New

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7 The nature of Progressive interpretations means they are less welcoming to major works of unifying synthesis. The primary example is Nash, The Unknown American Revolution. See also: Edward Countryman, The American Revolution (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985). For prominent monographs, see the following footnotes.
9 Michael A. McDonnell, The Politics of War: Race, Class, & Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Also apparent in the fact that three of the six chapters about the War period concern Virginia, and one more concern events on its borders, in Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael, eds., Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).
York. Their appeal is obvious; the laboring classes were heavily involved in Pennsylvania politics; Virginia had the largest slave population in America; the British army occupied New York for seven years. Yet in order to come to terms with the totality of non-elite experience in the Revolutionary War, more places need to be studied. This will give historians a greater understanding of what different people believed the Revolution meant; who controlled the Revolution on a local level; and how America did, and did not, change during the Founding period. Considering its importance to resistance to Britain leading up to 1776, no place seems riper for study than Boston.

This thesis will study Boston from the end of the American siege of the town on 18 March 1776 to the close of 1777. I have focused narrowly on this short period in order to examine the core issues of army mobilization and price regulation in close detail. The discourse around these issues was crucial for Boston patriots; in just twenty-one months, the celebrated unity of the town crumbled in the face of trying economic circumstances. This was also the part of the war where the military conflict remained somewhat close to Boston, and there was still a perceived threat of British reinvasion; this added urgency and panic to public discourse. In response to disagreements, elite patriots began to redefine the meaning of patriotism to suit their interests, abandoning the concerns of the laboring classes. This was an important turning point in Boston, reflecting the direction of the Revolution more broadly.

There are several major source groups that can be drawn upon to reconstruct Boston’s history in this period. The first are the records of the Boston town meetings;
in this celebrated system, Boston males with sufficient property could vote on a wide
variety of matters concerning the town’s governance. The records provide insight into
the issues that occupied the people’s attention, caused internal conflict, and what
decisions were made to address them. It was, however, a forum only for those who
had sufficient property; that is, for the elite and some of the middle sort.¹²

This was also probably true of Boston’s two major newspapers, *The Boston
Gazette* and *The Independent Chronicle*, which are my second major source set.¹³
Newspapers were how patriots communicated their cause to the public.¹⁴ In
investigating Boston’s public sphere I was of course influenced by the work of
Benedict Anderson, but also Michael Warner. Warner has detailed how American
print culture created a common public discourse through which political ideas were
dispersed in the Revolutionary period.¹⁵ Anderson and Warner show how the
newspapers are useful for providing insight into the ideas that dominated Boston’s
public discourse, and how changes in that discourse reflect changes in Boston’s
politics.

For anecdotal evidence of events in Boston, I primarily relied on the
correspondence of John and Abigail Adams. The two constantly wrote letters to each
other, and a number of friends and family in Massachusetts. Many valuable details
about occurrences in Boston can be derived from these writings. However, the
authors are all wealthy patriots and many of them had a particular distaste for the
common inhabitants of Boston. Yet using the techniques of ethnography pioneered

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¹² Nash, *Urban Crucible*, p. 273; Young, *Liberty Tree*, p. 44.
¹³ Uriel Heyd, *Reading Newspapers: Press and Public in Eighteenth-Century Britain and
Revolution*, ed. by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench (Worcester: American Antiquarian
Society, 1980), pp. 11–57; Richard Buel Jr., ‘Freedom of the Press in Revolutionary America:
97.
by Clifford Geertz and introduced to studies of the Revolution by Rhys Isaac, significant evidence of laboring class actions and motivations can be mined from these letters.\textsuperscript{16} I was also particularly helped in constructing a picture of non-elite Bostonians by Alfred F. Young’s biography of George Robert Twelves Hewes, a Bostonian shoemaker whose life story was recorded because of his involvement in the Boston Tea Party.\textsuperscript{17}

Careful study of these sources reveals a markedly different picture of Revolutionary Boston than studies focused on pre-war resistance. On 18 March 1776, the British army evacuated Boston, ending the first campaign of the Revolutionary War. The American forces reclaimed the city, and the town government began to function soon after. Yet there was to be no quick return to normalcy. Most of the population had fled the town in the early months of the siege; many did not return. The town had suffered significant physical damage in the previous year, and reconstruction was not a quick process. Though figures on its economy during this period are not available, the end of trade with Britain certainly harmed the port town’s business activity. Anecdotal evidence suggests the poor suffered particularly badly during the two years after the siege. Goods were constantly in short supply due to the cutoff of trade with Britain and demands from the military. This alone would have made prices high; what made them even worse was the Massachusetts government’s financing of the war through the printing of money.

Boston had been a divided town before the conflict with Britain; there was a major, and growing, gap between the rich and poor. An elite class of merchants and politicians benefitted from increased involvement in the Atlantic economy, while


\textsuperscript{17} Alfred F. Young, \textit{The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).
laboring Bostonians were hit hard by its fluctuations. My research suggests that the resistance movement against Britain temporarily united the town against a common enemy; Parliament’s attempts at taxation antagonised all classes. The strength of the town’s resistance to the British compelled leading patriots to expect it would remain a bastion of patriotism even after the British had evacuated.

But the trying circumstances of the post-siege years tempered the laboring classes’ patriotism. For non-elites, patriotism primarily meant a commitment to family and community. They first displayed this in their unenthusiastic response to calls for increased enlistment into the Continental Army. It seems likely many laboring Bostonians briefly served in the army when they were evacuated from the town during the siege. Their experiences were not pleasant, and many felt they owed no more than a few months service. When there was another call for soldiers in 1776, and it was clear they would have to serve further from home, few were keen to enlist.

This response alarmed elite patriots. For them, a fall in enlistments was a sign of the common people’s lack of virtue. This was a concept important to many elites due to the influence of classical republicanism. Elites believed that without virtuous citizens, the Revolution, and a new republican government, could be led astray by self-interest and harmful ideas. As the people with the most to lose from the failure of the Revolution, this alarmed them. The concept of virtue made them particularly sensitive to internal disagreements, and exacerbated distrust of the laboring classes. During this same period, elite patriots were also starting to see disagreements among themselves expressed in town meetings and the newspapers. Patriot unity not only cracked along class lines; elites had different ideas on what was needed to revive Boston and stabilise the newly independent Massachusetts. These internal disagreements, brought on by ‘external’ challenges to their control of the situation, only heightened elite alarm.

The result of these two developments was a change in the tone of public sphere discussion in early 1777. Initially at least, patriots filled the newspapers with
attacks on Bostonians' lack of virtue and their lack of commitment to the patriot cause. But soon, more explicit links were drawn between the selfish and the 'timid', and 'Tories'. This rhetorical move was an attempt to achieve two aims: firstly, to create a more concrete definition of patriotism, on elite terms; and secondly, to recreate the British enemy that had united Boston patriots in the years prior to 1776. This discourse became increasingly panicked over the first half of 1777 as patriots worried that Toryism was gaining traction amongst the common people, and that the British were going to reinvade the town.

However, another issue arose in early 1777 that further illustrated the divisions within the town. Continuing price rises led to ever-greater suffering in the town, and food riots broke out around Massachusetts. In response, the Massachusetts General Court, or House of Representatives, attempted to regulate prices. Belief in economic justice led most of the population, elite and non-elite, to conclude that merchants and farmers were deliberately charging higher prices. Many believed that prices the result of decisions made by people rather than market forces. Laboring Bostonians, invested in community wellbeing, held these beliefs passionately, as evidenced in the mobs who attacked merchants who continued to set unfair prices after a Regulating Act was passed.

But political elites increasingly began to sympathise with merchants of their class. Increased involvement in the Atlantic economy had led to a drift amongst merchants toward a belief in free trade and individual economic rights. In early 1777, elite patriots had framed economic justice as patriotic; setting unfair prices and withholding goods from market was evidence of Toryism. However, soon elites saw that the Regulating Act did not work, and that it led to increased crowd action by the laboring classes. This made them fear, again, that the Revolution might collapse. In response, they began to reframe patriotism in public discourse as a claim to rights to trade freely. The meaning of the Revolution was changed to suit the interests of the
elite. Eventually, the legislature repealed the Regulating Act was repealed, despite the sufferings of the laboring classes.

Underneath the apparent unity celebrated by many historians, then, Boston was a deeply divided town. During the Revolution, these divisions manifested themselves as a debate about the obligations and meaning of patriotism. The town’s story is an example of how a revolutionary people at war wrestled with the meaning of their Revolution. Particularly significant in these years was how elite patriots began to redefine the conflict in ways that suited their interests, but abandoned the concerns of the laboring classes. To deflect concerns about the direction they pushed the Revolution in, they constructed an ‘other’ in the form of Toryism in public discourse. This legitimized their views and undermined their opponents. Boston shows why the war years are key to understanding the political and social development of the United States. Comprehending the issues of these years allows a more complicated and richer portrait of the American Revolution to emerge. But most of all, the story of Boston in these years provides a rejoinder to its supposedly triumphant story of the 1763–76 period. Revolution had not been a cure for its social and economic problems.
Chapter One

‘If the storm should again burst upon this quarter…’

Boston faced serious social tensions and economic difficulties after the British evacuation in early 1776. These problems defined Boston in the two years after the siege. Yet the town’s woes pre-dated 1776 by several decades. Its economy had been stagnant for much of the mid-eighteenth century, and this had resulted in a major divide between elites and non-elites. In order to understand events in Boston in 1776-1777, we need to investigate the town’s history in the last decades of the colonial era.

The Decline of Boston

For most of the first-half of the eighteenth century, Boston was one of the major towns of the American colonies. As the biggest port of the area, it was the primary connection between the expanding hinterland of New England and the rest of the world. Its import-export market thrived off this connection; those in the countryside sent in grain, cattle and lumber, while the surrounding coast supplied fish. In return, Boston merchants brought the rest of New England the goods of Scotland, Ireland, Holland, the Caribbean, and especially England. As the overall population of New England tripled from 1690 to 1740, so did Boston’s. This growth supported the artisans of the town in the construction industries. The town was also home to a flourishing shipbuilding industry, which prospered on the back of English wars in the early eighteenth century.¹

But Boston’s prominence did not last. In the 1740s, the town went into a decline it could not pull itself out of for decades. This fallow period began with the

major losses of life the town suffered in the Anglo-Spanish and Anglo-French Wars from 1739 to 1748. The town provided a larger proportion of its men for military service than did the rest of Massachusetts, and lost at least 400 of them. Boston's casualty rates in these two wars, in percentage terms, were worse than they would be during both the Revolution and the Civil War. These losses increased the number of widows in the town to 1,200, almost all of whom had dependent children and were in need of local government assistance. To pay for the care of these women, the town had to raise taxes at the very moment when the number of taxable inhabitants was falling. New taxes were also put in place to pay for the war expeditions themselves. At the same time, the Massachusetts currency was on the decline. This hit the artisans of Boston very hard, leading some of the middling sort to leave the town.

In the decade from 1742 to 1752, Boston's population fell from 17,000 to under 16,000.

The end of war in 1748 also brought a predictable recession as military contracts for local industries tapered off. This led to a serious decline in the shipbuilding industry; in the next forty years, the industry did not achieve the production levels it managed during the first half of the eighteenth century. More middling artisans, in particular, fell on hard times. The town soon experienced a vicious circle, as poverty forced taxes up, which caused yet more middling artisans economic difficulties and to also require assistance. On top of this, a serious smallpox epidemic hit the town in 1752, and there was an increased risk of laborers being

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4 Ibid., p. 182.
7 Ibid., p. 183.
impressed into the British navy in this period. The town became less attractive to potential migrants, meaning it did not benefit from the population increases other prominent towns like New York and Philadelphia experienced in the mid-eighteenth century.

Wealth disparity was growing, and other occurrences only exacerbated this. When attempts to help the town’s poor failed, the town’s wealthier people began to blame the poor for their own poverty and offer less assistance. Meanwhile, the religious revivals of the 1740s, sometimes called The Great Awakening, were particularly potent amongst Boston’s lower classes. This further encouraged the fracturing of the community, as the wealthy of Boston rejected the egalitarian message of preachers like George Whitefield, while laboring Bostonians embraced these views.

The state of the town was only to get worse in the 1750s. The Seven Years’ War had an even greater impact on Boston than King George’s Wars had. Nearly every laboring class male in Boston was to serve in the conflict at some point; 10% of those who served, or around 300 men, died. When combining these losses with those suffered between 1739 and 1748, Boston had experienced, proportionally, the equivalent of two twentieth-century world wars within a single generation.

The war also encouraged a growing gap between the rich and poor. Wealthy merchants benefitted from increased international trade, but the instability of this

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11 Nash, *Urban Crucible*, p. 184; Egual, *New World Economies*, p. 55; the town’s relative decline can also be partly seen in the amount of goods being exported from Boston. It experienced much slower rates of growth than both New York and Philadelphia in this area during the 1750s and 1760s, and had been surpassed by Philadelphia in the 1760s. See McCusker and Menard, *British America*, p. 196.
international market was hurting the town’s laboring classes. This gap in experience led to a difference in beliefs; many wealthy colonists became concerned with capital accumulation and believed that self-interest was not harmful. These were the early developments of what would now be called economic liberalism. Such beliefs were in opposition to longstanding laboring classes' principals of community economic justice; non-elites believed that the well being of the community should always come before individual economic freedom. Actions considered greedy and self-interested could be the subject of mob justice. But Boston merchants found such beliefs were no longer relevant to their interests; the laboring classes suffered as a result. Hard times forced many citizens off the town voting rolls, meaning there was no political forum they could easily express their concerns; resentment grew.¹⁶

Tensions within the town came to a head in the 1763 town elections. Internal conflict manifested itself in a battle between the ‘court party’ and the ‘popular party’. The court party, led by future Massachusetts colonial Governor Thomas Hutchinson and those around him, were open to ‘modern’ economic ideas but believed only the wealthy and educated should be trusted with the governance of the town. The common people were too passionate and anarchic; not surprisingly, the court party hated Boston’s town meeting system, where voters could express their ideas in a public forum. Most of the court party was Anglican and had connections, whether economic or familial, to Britain. Opposing the court party was the popular party, led at this time by James Otis. Their views were the precise opposite; they held on to fading concepts of economic justice, and argued for more democratic politics in order to ensure this justice. Supported by the common people, most of whom could not vote, the popular party were non-Anglican and of lower economic stations. However, its

¹⁶ Nash, Urban Crucible, pp. 257, 273, 281–2; one cause of this was high prices for necessities during the period, see Wicker, ‘Colonial Monetary Standards’, p. 879. This conflict between elites and the laboring classes over economic activity had recurred throughout the first half of the eighteenth century as well, see Barbara Clark Smith, The Freedoms We Lost: Consent and Resistance in Revolutionary America (New York: The New Press, 2010), pp. 62–72.
members were still decidedly of the middle and upper ranks of Bostonian society. In the heated conflict of 1763, more people voted in town elections of officials and General Court representatives than even during the conflict with Britain in the following decade. This occurred despite the fact that so many had been pushed off the voting rolls in the 1750s. The results of the elections did not lead to the supremacy of either party; seething tensions remained. According to Gary Nash, the economic, social and political turmoil of the early 1760s left Boston a community 'only in the geographical sense…in social terms Boston had become fragmented, unsure of itself, ridden with internecine animosities.'

With the town divided and facing economic strife, the British began their attempts to raise revenue through taxation of American trade. The Stamp Act of 1765 began the pre-Revolutionary conflict in earnest. The fury of the townspeople, whether conservative or 'radical', was turned on to a common enemy: the representatives of the British Parliament in the colonial government. The tax on all business and legal transactions involving paper offended colonists for political and economic reasons, which were inextricably linked in their minds. For Boston’s merchants, lawyers and newspapermen, the Stamp Act represented an unjust intervention in the American colonies that would cut into their profits. Lacking a vote in Parliament, they could not even have a formal say in its creation; their lack of political rights deprived them of economic rights. For the laboring classes, the Act was potentially harmful to their

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standards of living and it was another affront to their belief in the primacy of fairness in the economy. The colonial government seemed to be enriching itself from the fruits of common people’s labor, while they grew poorer. The grievances Boston’s populace had against each other did not go away, but now they had an enemy they could all agree oppressed them. Internal fractures took a back seat for the time being.

Initially, the ‘better sort’ of Bostonians who were outraged by this British intervention in colonial affairs encouraged the fury of the crowd. In one instance, prominent Bostonians associated with the popular party helped set up effigies of British customs officials, who were supposed to enforce and collect the stamp tax, for the townspeople to burn. Yet soon these ‘liberal Whigs’, some of who were soon to be prominent revolutionaries, found that they could not control the crowd. They had encouraged the unleashing of the laboring classes’ fury, only to find they could not determine what it did from that point. An uneasy relationship between the mob and those who wanted to control the mob existed for the next ten years. Liberal Whigs endorsed their actions sometimes but always distanced themselves from direct acts of violence, even as they saw how they could not sustain their cause without the support of the mob.

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20 Nash, Urban Crucible, pp. 296–7; Smith, Freedoms We Lost, p. 89; Young, Liberty Tree, pp. 46–7.
24 For the main ideologies and the differences between them during this period, see Nash, Urban Crucible, pp. 340–6.
26 Nash, Urban Crucible pp. 342, 350–2, 359–60; Smith, Freedoms We Lost, pp. 121–3; Young, Liberty Tree, p. 48
The Siege of Boston

For the decade from 1765 to 1775, the American colonies’ conflict with Britain remained fundamentally the same. The colonists objected to unwarranted interference in colonial affairs and a lack of political rights; the British remained unmoved by their concerns and tried several more times to tax the colonists.\(^27\) Boston was a centre of this unrest.\(^28\) The decade also brought the most tumultuous economic conditions the colonies had ever seen, which added more fuel to the fire.\(^29\) For their troubles, the British sent an army to occupy Boston to keep control of the population. This only infuriated the people more, as soldiers now competed with laboring people for work and were a public nuisance.\(^30\)

After the seething conflict finally turned into a war with the Battles of Lexington and Concord on 17 April 1775, Boston became the home of the first major military campaign of the American Revolutionary War. The occupying British army was contained within Boston by Massachusetts’s militia forces, which surrounded the peninsula on which the town sat.\(^31\) The Siege of Boston had begun.

During the early months of the war, there was a mass exodus of people from the town. From April to June, 10,000 people fled Boston to escape the siege, though a few loyalists from around Massachusetts sought refuge from persecution by migrating into the town.\(^32\) Not everyone was able to leave legally at this time; some, like shoemaker George Robert Hewes, were unable to get permits, and had to find

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\(^32\) Carr, *After the Siege*, pp. 22–3.
ways to escape. Others, like merchant John Rowe and Son of Liberty James Lovell, chose to stay in order to protect property. The siege exacerbated problems in the town. Food prices soared as the American forces were effective in cutting off the British supply. Soon this became a serious problem for the poorest inhabitants of Boston. Disease, including smallpox, the most feared of all diseases, became prevalent. During the winter, houses of absent Bostonians were torn down for firewood. Other homes were damaged or destroyed by vandalizing, thieving British soldiers and desperate citizens. Natural disasters, such as storms and especially uncontained fires, also did serious damage. As conditions in the town worsened, order crumbled. The British army began exercising arbitrary punishment on the citizenry, particularly imprisoning people for extended periods on questionable charges in unsanitary conditions. Fifty percent of those taken prisoner during the summer of 1775 died as a result of the poor conditions. Those not imprisoned dealt with violence and verbal abuse.

The end came in March 1776, following extended cannonading by the newly formed Continental army, led by George Washington. This caused more extensive damage and fires, though no one was killed. Soon the British forces, led by General William Howe, agreed to evacuate the town without burning it to the ground. Despite this agreement, civil order in Boston completely collapsed in the final weeks of the occupation, as loyalists and British soldiers engaged in extensive looting. On 17

34 Carr, After the Siege, pp. 22–3; John Rowe, Letters and Diary of John Rowe, Boston Merchant 1759–1762, 1764–1779, ed. by Anne Rowe Cunningham (Boston: W. B. Clarke, 1903), pp. 291–305.
35 Carr, After the Siege, p. 25.
37 Carr, After the Siege, pp. 29–32.
38 Ibid., pp. 33–5.
March, eleven months after it began, the Siege of Boston ended as the British soldiers and 900 Loyalists sailed out of the town.\textsuperscript{39}

**Going Home?**

The evacuation of the British ended Boston's direct military involvement in the Revolutionary War, but the damage it wrought lingered. The town’s population only reached 10,000 again in 1780.\textsuperscript{40} Those who had left had sought refuge in surrounding towns in Massachusetts. Many reconstructed their lives in their new homes and never returned.\textsuperscript{41} The damage done to the town meant many did not have homes or possessions to which they could return to anyway. Boston’s economy had been in a bad state pre-war, and it was only to worsen after the siege. Attempts to escape this economic malaise likely motivated many to take any opportunity they could to make a living elsewhere. On top of this, smallpox was only cleared from the town in September 1776.\textsuperscript{42}

Fear of the British reinvading may have also kept the population low. Even in the early weeks after the siege, people worried the town remained vulnerable. Abigail Adams wrote from nearby Braintree that she ‘[c]ould not] help suspecting some design which we do not yet comprehend.’\textsuperscript{43} In the first town meeting post-siege a committee appointed to wait on George Washington was asked to ensure he leave four pieces of artillery in place for the continued defense of Boston.\textsuperscript{44} Mercy Otis Warren wrote to John Adams in early April that while there was a ‘temporary calm’ in the region, she feared that ‘if the storm should again burst upon this quarter…we

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\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., pp. 35–8. The fates of Loyalists who fled the colonies has been little explored; see Maya Jasanoff, ‘The Other Side of Revolution: Loyalists in the British Empire’, The William and Mary Quarterly, 65, no. 2 (April 2008), pp. 205-32.
\textsuperscript{40} Carr, ‘Boston Demographics’, p. 584.
\textsuperscript{41} Carr, After the Siege, pp. 40–1.
\textsuperscript{42} Fenn, Pox Americana, pp. 34–7.
\textsuperscript{44} Boston Record Commissioners, Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Volume 18: Boston Town Records 1770–1777, (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1887), pp. 227–8.
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shall be too destitute of skillful navigators, to oppose its fury with success.\textsuperscript{45} This fear did not dissipate in the next two years. Some also suspected the British still had agents within the town ready to undermine the peoples’ loyalty to the patriot cause. A letter from ‘A Plain Countryman’ appeared in the Boston Gazette just one week after the end of the siege; this countryman viewed those who had stayed as self-interested and unwilling to make sacrifices for the patriot cause. Even worse, some were outright Tories who had not left with the British.\textsuperscript{46}

The town government found beginning to rebuild the town to be a great challenge. Getting so far as to estimate property damage from the siege did not happen until November 1776.\textsuperscript{47} But the town was also burdened by a large amount of debt, over £18,000 by the end of 1776, and there was no clear plan for paying this off.\textsuperscript{48} Most of the town’s money was spent caring for the poor; the lack of funds made this even harder than usual.\textsuperscript{49}

Attending a town meeting during this period would have drawn a citizen’s attention to just how many people had not returned to the town post-siege. Before April 1775, Dirk Hoerder’s work shows attendance of Boston town meetings rarely dropped below 500, and could, during times of crisis, be as high as 1,000 people. In the early months after the siege, the average attendance was only 200. Though highs of 500 were reached in early 1777, this was a peak, not a return to the pre-siege average.\textsuperscript{50}

Yet some undoubtedly did return, most likely those who dealt with uncomfortable living conditions during the siege. People in the areas surrounding Boston opened their homes to refugees, meaning two or three extra families were in

\textsuperscript{46} ‘A Plain Countryman’, The Boston Gazette, 25 March 1776.
\textsuperscript{47} Boston Record Commissioners, Boston Town Records, p. 250.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., pp. 258–9.
\textsuperscript{49} Carr, After the Siege, pp. 97, 110
many homes. Some were less fortunate, and were forced to wander the area in search of shelter.\textsuperscript{51} This likely contributed to weariness and a decline in enthusiasm for the patriot cause. Bostonian actions in the following two years may have thus been informed by these trying circumstances; protesting the British and fighting for the patriot cause was easier in one’s home, with one’s family and local community. Unsettling these fundamental parts of Bostonian’s lives did not turn them into loyalists, but might have tempered feelings about the Revolution in the coming years.

Concerns about smallpox, the return of the populace, the poor, the town budget and reinvasion were prevalent throughout this period. However, they were treated apolitically; though they had a serious effect on the lives of Bostonians, they were not the sorts of issues that caused debate in town meetings or handwringing in newspapers. That was reserved for the problems of enlistment in the militia and the Continental army, and the high prices of necessities. In the process of these issues being dealt with, non-elites revealed the nuances of their patriotism; they were more concerned with family and community wellbeing than sacrifice for a wider cause.

The Enlistment Drive

During the American Revolutionary War, the American forces were made up of two groups. The first was the state militias, in which men would usually serve for no longer than three months at a time. The second was the standing Continental army formed over the course of 1775-1776, which did most of the fighting. In the view of many revolutionaries, an ideal America would never have had the latter.

In colonial America, it was technically the case that all adult males were supposed to serve in the state militia.\textsuperscript{52} Relations with Native Americans had disintegrated in the seventeenth century; with the British not willing to send troops to

\begin{footnotes}
\item Carr, \textit{After the Siege}, p. 41.
\item Higginbotham, \textit{War of American Independence}, p. 9.
\end{footnotes}
defend these distant and small colonies, militia service was supposed to help
colonists take their defense, and offense, into their own hands.\textsuperscript{53} But natives had not
been a problem for Boston for almost a century, as the eastern Massachusetts tribes
had been wiped out or forced westward.\textsuperscript{54} The militia thus turned into a community
gathering that was not taken tremendously seriously in eastern Massachusetts.
Muster days were treated as excuses for festivities and heavy drinking.\textsuperscript{55} Despite the
requirement that all males serve in the militia, in reality the lower sorts of people were
excluded; it was an institution for the middling sort.\textsuperscript{56}

In the view of those who were ardent believers in republican virtue, the war
should have been a time for the militia to shine.\textsuperscript{57} Citizen soldiers, drawn from all
classes, would answer the call of duty and rise up against the tyranny of Britain.
There would be no need for a permanent army; volunteers would fill the quota of
soldiers required. For the first few months of the war, this was true.\textsuperscript{58} It was the militia
who fought the British in the Battles of Lexington and Concord that opened the war,
and who came from all over Massachusetts to besiege Boston.

But the enthusiasm for voluntary service quickly died off when men confronted
the reality of the military.\textsuperscript{59} Military discipline was strict; they faced the death penalty
for desertion. This was a world away from the militia’s festive mustering. Soon
middling militiamen were faced with being treated like men at the bottom of society.
Traditionally, it was the poor who had done the fighting, and so the soldiers were

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., pp. 1–2.
\textsuperscript{54} It has been argued that Native Americans remained a presence in Massachusetts
throughout the eighteenth century. See Donna Keith Baron, J. Edward Hood, and Holly V.
Izard, ‘They Were Here All Along: The Native American Presence in Lower-Central New
3 (July 1996), pp. 561-86.
\textsuperscript{55} Caroline Cox, \textit{A Proper Sense of Honour: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington’s
Army} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 8; Higginbotham, \textit{War of
American Independence}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{56} Higginbotham, \textit{War of American Independence}, pp. 12–3.
\textsuperscript{57} Cox, \textit{Proper Sense of Honour}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., pp. 10–11.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 3; Hoerder, \textit{Crowd Action}, p. 314.
treated like men of low social status. A divide was quickly established between officers and their men, even though at the start of the war many were from the same class. Disillusionment spread when officers were given a pay rise in December 1775 to cement this division. Poor treatment did not just come from officers; citizens also did not look on soldiers kindly. Patriotic service did not create social capital. Physical conditions were trying too; the army was soon surrounded by smallpox, and many of these soldiers were not immune. General sanitary conditions in the area around Boston were poor; the mass exodus of people from the town meant the area held far more people than usual. A scarcity of provisions was immediately a problem in the army, and much of the military’s time was spent trying to secure sufficient amounts of food and wood. This brought the army into direct conflict with the citizens of the area.

At this stage of the war, lingering patriotic fervor and short service terms kept significant mutiny from occurring. Instead, men simply left en masse when their three-month service terms were up. Some farmers did not even wait that long; many of them left during harvest season. By the time the Siege of Boston ended in March 1776, an enlistment problem had begun to develop in Massachusetts. There is no indication that Boston was required to provide troops for the Continental army for the first year of the war, as the town government was inoperative during the Siege. But when the British evacuated, it was expected to provide soldiers like everybody else.

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60 Cox, *Proper Sense of Honour*, pp. 8, 21.
In and around Boston, low enlistments continued for the rest of the year. There were several reasons for this, aside from fears of injury or death.\textsuperscript{66} Firstly, it seems likely that many Bostonians, having been forced to flee from their homes due to the siege, joined the Continental army in the initial wave of enlistments at the beginning of the war. Supporting this conclusion is a survey of the town taken in June 1776 to determine how many of the town’s men were in the army. The results, reported in September, claimed that 1566 families were surveyed; from these, 535 men were enlisted in the Continental army, 206 in active service in the state militia and 166 in the Sea Service.\textsuperscript{67} The sea service consisted of those on privateering vessels; this was a form of legalized piracy allowed during war, where men could take vessels out to attack and steal from British ships that transported goods to the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{68} If we assume that each family with someone in the service had only one man serving at that time, then almost 60% of families already had a member enlisted in mid-1776. It is safe to assume that some families had already had people serve a three-month term and then return. This could mean that by the summer of 1776, almost all of Boston’s men, or at least those who had returned to the town by that point, had served some time in the military. The reason enlistments were disappointing in 1776 may well have been that many men felt they had already served their time, found the experiencing less rewarding than they imagined, and returned home. The problem was, if the army was to rely on volunteers, the war required more sacrifice than Boston’s men felt they were required to give.

Insight into the mindset of an average laboring class Bostonian at this time can be mined from Alfred Young’s biography of George Robert Twelves Hewes. Hewes is an example of someone who enlisted in the service, initially on a privateering vessel in 1776, out of a desire both to fight the British \textit{and} profit from getting his hands on lucrative goods. As a lower class Bostonian who found his trade as a shoemaker

\textsuperscript{66} Cox, \textit{Proper Sense of Honour}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{67} Boston Record Commissioners, \textit{Boston Town Records}, p. 246.
\textsuperscript{68} Young, \textit{Shoemaker}, pp. 61–2.
unsatisfying, he did not find serving in the army so unpleasant as to not voluntarily repeat the experience. After serving at sea in 1776, he served in the militia for one to three months in 1777, and again in 1778 and 1781; in 1779 he took a second seven-and-a-half month privateering voyage. Hewes thus served more than the average Bostonian, but with a crucial condition; he did not enlist in the service until he had provided for his family. Hewes had moved his family out of Boston to Wrentham at the beginning of the siege. He himself had not been able to leave, and ended up escaping by boat in around July 1775. Then he made his way to Wrentham, and spent a year there before leaving to go to sea. He considered leaving his wife and four children a very difficult experience, but the possibility of major rewards through privateering motivated him to leave his family for several months.  

Prioritising of family over country suggests another reason why enlistments declined in 1776. As discussed, most Bostonians moved their families to surrounding areas at the start of the siege. Being forced away from home also meant being moved away from a source of income for many. The easiest source of employment in the area for men would have been to join the army. For Bostonian men in 1775, serving the patriot cause and providing for their family overlapped completely. But a year later, they had the chance to move their families back to their permanent homes. They could recommence the work they usually did and escape the unexpectedly harsh, unrewarding conditions of military life. Men had a choice between two much vaunted virtues: providing for family or sacrificing for the state and perhaps now ‘country’. Many probably felt they had already done sufficient service for their country by spending a few months in the military, and now they believed it was time to return to providing for their families at closer quarters.

69 Ibid., pp. 58–62.  
Hewes’ pattern of service provides other insights into the mindset of laboring Bostonians. He was far from alone in being tempted by the promises of going on a privateering vessel. At a time when necessities were scarce and expensive, and the currency was weakening, privateering was a lucrative enterprise.\textsuperscript{71} Hence why Hewes twice went on voyages, though without much success. His service at sea is another indication of how the war was not just about serving the patriot cause for laboring Bostonians; it was, as Young says, also about a chance to take new opportunities for income. Considering the precarious state of Boston’s economy in the previous two decades, it is understandable why people like Hewes would find privateering so attractive. It was a potentially profitable way of serving Massachusetts and fighting the British. According to Hewes, privateering vessels also did not have military discipline, and there was less of an attempt to assert rank than in the army; he felt respected by his crewmates.\textsuperscript{72} Elites, on the other hand, disapproved of the practice. It was a sign of the greed of the people, suggesting they lacked virtue. For them the 166 people in the Sea Service did not count toward Boston’s contribution to the war, because those people were not fighting the British army directly.\textsuperscript{73} The belief that enlistments were low was thus partly a matter of differing perceptions.

At this point in time, men in Massachusetts could not be drafted into the Continental army, but they could be drafted into the state militia for three months of


\textsuperscript{72} Young, \textit{Shoemaker}, pp. 63–4.

service. This was not a solution to the long-term viability of the American war effort, but it was a potential short-term fix. However, this posed serious problems in Boston as well, as a muster day shortly after the Declaration of Independence displayed.⁷⁴ Men needed to be drafted for service in Canada, where the Americans had recently begun an offensive. Work by historians studying other states suggests that soldiers were willing to volunteer to protect their home states at this time, but not to travel elsewhere to defend distant locations.⁷⁵ It is not surprising then that Bostonians did not willingly sign up to go to Canada, and a draft executed. Those eligible to be drafted were made to assemble on Boston common, where men who had formed an Independent Company were told to guard the potential draftees to prevent them from leaving.⁷⁶ This Independent Company was a separate entity from the militia and the Continental army; it was only open to wealthier Bostonians, and was known for its expensive uniforms, ostentatious mustering, and having a common fund to pay for substitutes and fines to prevent members from being drafted into actual service.

William Cooper, merchant and town clerk, then informed the potential militiamen that either volunteers would step forward or every twenty-fifth man would be drafted. The men assembled resented the way they were treated as lesser individuals, and so promptly rioted. In a town meeting the following month, some men tried to have those who defied this draft fined so that a bounty, or payment for enlisting, could be given to those who volunteered to serve in Canada.⁷⁷ After being passed by voters at the meeting on 29 August, it was repealed by voters at another meeting on 9 September.⁷⁸ A diverse mix of people could attend the town meetings, so that on one day the town could vote one way and then the following day vote the other. This was

⁷⁴ Hoerder, Crowd Action, pp. 317, 324.
⁷⁶ Hoerder, Crowd Action, pp. 317, 324. Boston’s Independent Company is referenced almost nowhere else in the sources available to me. Based on its description in this incident, it appears to be similar to organisations in other states, see McDonnell, Politics of War, pp. 40–3, 45–7.
⁷⁷ Boston Record Commissioners, Boston Town Records, p. 244.
⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 245.
not to be the last time this occurred. The affair again showed that poor treatment
alienated laboring people from enlisting.

The enlistment issue was not localised to Boston; it was proving troublesome in
much of the colonies. George Washington quickly became insistent on having a
standing army with soldiers enlisted for as long as possible. As a result, over the
course of 1776, all the states passed laws allowing soldiers to be enlisted for three
years; Massachusetts joined them in October, following a request for fifteen
battalions from Congress. This law was intended to make it easier for the army to
have sufficient manpower, important at a time when the army was meant to be
expanding. Despite the enlistment troubles throughout 1776, enlistment officers were
incentivized, by the offer of commissions, to try to fill quotas by 1 December. To
incite enlistments, there would be bounties offered.

During this period, the gap between middling artisans and the ‘lower sort’
became clear. An unsuccessful petition prepared in a town meeting suggested the
middle sort probably did not like the three-month drafts; the petition asked for them to
be ended and replaced solely with three-year service terms. As artisans in a fragile
economic situation, militia service meant the possibility of being taken away from
their work or potentially having to pay multiple sums in order to send a substitute in
their place. The militia would also likely pay less and be difficult and unsatisfying.
Constantly dodging militia service would also not look especially patriotic. The middle
sort may have felt that it was better to try to convince poorer Bostonians to take the

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80 The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay: To
Which Are Prefixed the Charters of the Province with Historical and Explanatory Notes as an
Appendix. ed. by State Library of Massachusetts. Vol. IX (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing,
1918), pp. 605–6; Jonathan Smith, ‘How Massachusetts Raised Her Troops in the
351–2.
82 Boston Record Commissioners, Boston Town Records, pp. 266–7.
burden of service for the duration of the war, on the justification that such people would struggle to find other work at this time.

However, it appears that in late 1776 and early 1777, the poor were not to be so easily swayed.\textsuperscript{83} The quota was not filled until May 1777. A little bit of extra economic incentive was not enough to overcome the reasons they had to stay away from the army: namely, concern for family, a desire to return to pre-war work, taking the more beneficial offer of privateering, and dislike of army conditions. The lower sort of Boston would have been further turned away by rumours that Massachusetts' soldiers were returning without being paid.\textsuperscript{84} Furthermore, the currency continued to weaken and soldiers' wages, already low, failed to keep up with inflation.\textsuperscript{85} Further economic and social turmoil resulted from the controversy over high prices and attempted price regulation, making the idea of leaving family even less appealing.\textsuperscript{86}

When it quickly became clear that enlistments were not going to be that easy, enlistment officers started pushing up the bounties.\textsuperscript{87} This did not have the immediate effect of filling quotas; instead, many laboring people realized they could play the enlistment officers off each other. Each town had to fill their own quota, and enlistment officers operated seemingly independently. Thus, laboring people could push bounties up by threatening to enlist in another town where they could get a better deal.\textsuperscript{88} This was not the only reason those who may have considered enlisting might have been motivated to stall. The Massachusetts General Court also started to


\textsuperscript{85} Smith, Freedoms We Lost, pp. 145–7.

\textsuperscript{86} See below.


\textsuperscript{88} Acts and Resolves, p. 781.
pass laws blatantly aimed at incentivizing poorer men to enlist; for example, they passed a law preventing men from being arrested for small debts if they joined the army.\textsuperscript{89} The reason Boston did not fill its quota until May was perhaps because laboring people saw a chance to take every pound they could from the army and government. But some undoubtedly remained uninterested in enlisting.

In the end though, the town’s common enemy resolved the conflict. On 29 April, John Adams sent a letter to James Bowdoin, which claimed that the British had sent an army of 13,000 men to attack Boston.\textsuperscript{90} Nathanael Greene seemed to confirm this claim in a letter to Adams on 2 May.\textsuperscript{91} It seems likely these were just two of several claims of British reinvasion; the Massachusetts General Court passed a resolve on 30 April, filled with language of alarm, calling for a draft to be done to fill the Continental army battalion quotas by 15 May.\textsuperscript{92} Rumours of this attack also set off a panic in Boston; a town meeting on 3 May talked of the ‘crisis’ at hand.\textsuperscript{93} The town attempted to secure soldiers to defend themselves; initially there was to be a draft in Rhode Island in order to raise soldiers to defend Boston, but the town rejected this in favour of their own draft. This was to be executed on 15 May, as ordered by the General Court, if its quota was not filled by that date.

However, the town did not need to perform the draft, because its quota was filled ‘early’. The panic appears to have led to a strong enough surge in enlistments to fill the town’s quota and end the enlistment crisis. In the \textit{Boston Gazette} of 19 May, Major General Heath published a message of congratulations to the town for filling its

\begin{itemize}
\item[A\textsuperscript{89}] Massachusetts General Court, 1776-77. 0031. \textit{An Act to Prevent the Arresting Soldiers for Small Debts, Who Have Inlisted or Shall Inlist into the Continental Army} (Boston: Secretary of the Commonwealth, 1777), hosted by The State Library of Massachusetts, \url{http://archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/117054}, accessed 30 September 2013.
\item[A\textsuperscript{90}] John Adams to James Bowdoin, 29 April 1777, \textit{Founding Families}, \url{http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?id=PJA05d102}, accessed 30 September 2013.
\item[A\textsuperscript{92}] Acts and Resolves, p. 921.
\item[A\textsuperscript{93}] Boston Record Commissioners, \textit{Boston Town Records}, pp. 277–8.
\end{itemize}
quota earlier than much of the rest of Massachusetts. But the filling of the quota did not imply Boston’s men had found a strong feeling of patriotism, merely a fear that the survival of their homes, families and livelihoods was at stake. These were the same factors that inspired men to join the army at the start of the war, and the same reasons that fervor fell away in 1776. Though records of exactly how the quota was finally filled are not available, it is also possible that fear and desperation on the part of the town government led them to make promises of large bounties and shorter terms of service in order to ensure the quota was filled. A draft was likely feared by the town’s elite due to the previous difficulty of militia drafts and the town’s social unrest. This is evident from the fact that other parts of Massachusetts had not filled their quotas by August 1777, and a special resolve was passed in the General Court to force them to do so; the implication was that the unnamed towns had been unwilling to have drafts.

There were other demands for soldiers in Boston over the remainder of 1777, but these appear to have caused little controversy. However, Abigail Adams did allude to the methods by which quotas were filled as being unusual and ‘crooked.’

**Price Regulation**

While the enlistment issue was a major concern, just as much, if not more, attention was paid to the high prices and scarcity of most goods during 1776-1777. Prices soared for a combination of reasons. The breakdown of relations with the British also meant a breakdown of trade; goods now only came from the Caribbean, not Europe, making prices for imports much higher. The war had disrupted

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94 *The Boston Gazette*, 19 May 1777.


agricultural production by taking people away from farms; this raised the price of agricultural labour, already a field with high demand and short supply in Massachusetts. The war also meant the military demanded many goods, and frequently impressed them without paying. Perhaps most significant was the fact that state governments, unwilling to tax the people, were paying for the war by printing money. Naturally, this led to constant inflation. 97

Yet the reason prices were such a major issue in Boston went back to the pre-Revolution conflict between wealthier merchants who had embraced Atlantic trade and a wider market economy, and the laboring classes who prioritised economic justice and community wellbeing. This was a feud between those who believed the market set prices, and those who believed individuals set prices and should be held accountable for the prices they set. Hence, when prices rose, much of the population took this as a sign that merchants and farmers were treating them unjustly. In 1776-77, a significant number of the political elite also supported regulation, or felt pressured enough to enforce regulations with which they did not agree. This would change later in the war. 98

Barbara Clark Smith has argued that a belief in economic justice gained potency during this period because it became tied up with ideas of patriotism, and what patriots owed each other. For example, currency financing ‘acquired a particular meaning: the currency would circulate among a Patriot population already pledged to dealing with one another as neighbours and countrymen...With each transaction [Patriots] would reenact their commitment to independence and their trust in Revolutionary authorities.’ 99 Currency financing was not supposed to be a problem because patriots would treat each other fairly, and so prices would stay at an acceptable level. The problem with this interpretation of events was that when prices

97 Smith, Freedoms We Lost, p. 144.
98 Ibid., pp. 155–9.
rose, much of the population took this as an indisputable sign that merchants and farmers were lacking in sufficient community spirit and had become greedy.

Smith argues this connection between patriotism and economic action was formed during the conflict with Britain in the previous decade. Through the Stamp Act, the Tea Act and the like, Parliament tried to alter and control how colonists conducted Atlantic trade, as well as more local transactions. The response of the colonists was nonimportation and non-consumption agreements; that is, colonists simply withdrew from the Atlantic market. This caused shortages, but colonists believed that all patriots, united in principles, would sacrifice personal gain for the wider community by not raising prices in response to these shortages. With these boycotts enacted multiple times from 1765 to 1775, this connection was pressed into the populace’s minds. It was not just a laboring class belief either; the patriot elite also largely supported this interpretation, although their belief was starting to wane by 1774 as the crisis stretched on and boycotts hurt merchant business.\(^\text{100}\) Ordinary men and women did the policing of these boycotts, legitimising their action against what they considered unfair. Consequently when the laboring people of Boston saw prices that they considered unfair, they reacted publicly and loudly.\(^\text{101}\)

In 1776, high prices were an issue of concern, but not one that dominated public discourse. This was perhaps because such discourse was the domain of wealthier Bostonians who were not so quickly hurt by the constant weakening of Massachusetts’ currency. However, the correspondents of John Adams did note it on occasion. In May 1776, James Sullivan, a Massachusetts Superior Court judge, complained ‘public Virtue is almost Swallowed up in a desire of possessing paper

\(^{100}\) It has also been argued that some merchants had their own personal agendas for supporting this course of action, involving pushing out competition. See Tyler, Smugglers and Patriots.

\(^{101}\) Smith, Freedoms We Lost, pp. 14–5, 95, 117, 120–1, 135, 138–40
Currency… It is unsurprising Sullivan saw this, considering that this was a time when it was becoming increasingly difficult for less wealthy Bostonians to pay for basic goods. Abigail Adams wrote in June 1776: ‘Every thing bears a very great price. The Merchant complains of the Farmer and the Farmer of the Merchant. Both are extravagant.’ Merchants and farmers feuded because they were both blamed by the population for the high prices of goods; they in turn put the responsibility on each other. The Massachusetts General Court also passed a law declaring that almost no supplies were to be removed from the state, unless they were going to the army, from 25 June to 10 November. In its desperation, Massachusetts tried to hoard goods, a practice it would continue the following year.

Bostonians became convinced that merchants and farmers were withholding goods from markets in order to drive up prices further. Many also believed that there were merchants who tried to eliminate all competition for their goods so that people would be forced to pay their price. These beliefs were evident in the way scarcity and high prices were dealt with in the town meetings of 1776. The issue first appeared in a meeting on 23 May, when a motion was passed that formed a three-person committee to prevent the ‘forestalling’ of the market and the monopolization of wood imported to the town ‘over water’. This committee did not appear again until October, when its purpose was expanded to preventing the forestalling of all ‘Necessaries of Life’. The committee was asked to draft a By-Law against

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106 Boston Record Commissioners, *Boston Town Records*, p. 236. This refers to the town’s constant problems with getting supplies of firewood, a result of the wooded areas of New England having shrunk. Essential supplies for the whole town had to come from Maine. See Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt*, pp. 25–6.

107 Boston Record Commissioners, *Boston Town Records*, p. 249.
forestalling, but the meeting’s attendants rejected it in a vote. Instead a new eight-
person committee was formed, with all-new members, and asked to consider a
petition ‘of a Number of the Inhabitants’ on the forestalling of necessitates. The
committee reported back a month later, but they had few suggestions for how to
prevent unreasonable prices. However, they also refused to name those accused of
forestalling. The process combating high prices went through in the Boston town
meetings in 1776 was to be the pattern when price regulation became an even
greater issue in 1777. A large part of the population cared deeply about it and wanted
something done; politicians tried to enforce lower prices, but could not find an
effective legal method. They were unwilling to aggressively pursue the methods they
did try, and prices did not fall, leading to a loss of enthusiasm for regulation.

Circumstances soon made high prices and their regulation a major topic of
public discussion. The establishment of three-year service terms in the Continental
army in October 1776 was a part of this; it meant enlistment became an issue to be
dealt with by the state and the ‘nation’. It could not only be handled on a community
militia level. This meant soldiers could only be paid in wages, and not have their
services exchanged for goods or produce. High prices would directly impact the war
effort; if prices were not addressed, potential soldiers would be reluctant to serve,
weakening the patriot cause. This perhaps motivated government actions in January
1777. The turn away from military service as a way of serving the cause also made
people look for other ways of being patriotic; the preexisting tradition of economic
boycotts and policing prices naturally made the economy a focus.

High prices also caused hardship in other parts of Massachusetts; riots over
food prices had already broken out in Longmeadow, southwest of Boston, and

109 Smith, Freedoms We Lost, pp. 146–7.
110 Ibid., p. 147.
Salem, a short distance northeast of Boston. Pressure was mounting, and people, frustrated by a lack of government response, threatened to take matters into their own hands. This was why the Massachusetts General Court passed ‘An Act to Prevent Monopoly and Oppression’ on 25 January 1777. It quickly became known as the Regulating Act, as it fixed prices for necessities. At this point, it certainly had widespread support in Boston and Massachusetts more generally. It represented an attempt to assert the authority of the state on this issue; government had been shown to be impotent when it tried to address high prices in the Boston town meetings. It needed some sort of legislation to enforce punishments. This act offered that, and would hopefully keep riots to a minimum.

Signs of the problems to come were clear in the 6 February meeting that established the committee to help with the enforcement of the Regulating Act. As high prices were considered a threat to liberty and safety, responsibility for the enforcement of the Act was put on the Committee of Correspondence, Inspection and Safety. Yet the town did not trust the Boston CCIS to enforce the act itself; hence another committee consisting only of men ‘not in Trade’ was formed to ensure that those who defied the Regulating Act were punished. The Boston CCIS was a particularly elite committee, filled with established political figures; John Hancock and Sam Adams had recently been members. These were people with major economic interests in Boston, and thus middling voters considered them unlikely to punish men of their class with which they had preexisting relationships. Such suspicions would soon be proven correct.

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112 Massachusetts General Court, 1776-77 Chap. 0014. An Act to Prevent Monopoly and Oppression (Boston: Secretary of the Commonwealth, 1777), hosted by The State Library of Massachusetts, [http://archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/117037](http://archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/117037), accessed 30 September 2013.
113 Ibid., p. 260
114 Ibid., pp. 241–2.
Though much of the town lauded the act, it quickly became clear that it was not going to operate as desired. Rather than sell goods at the legal prices, merchants decided simply to not sell their goods at all. The aim appears to have been to wait out the act, in the hope that it would soon be repealed and regular economic activity could resume.\textsuperscript{115} It created an unpleasant atmosphere; on 8 February, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John, ‘Nothing now but the regulating Bill engrosses their attention. The merchant scolds, the farmer growls, and every one seems wroth that he cannot grind his neighbor.’\textsuperscript{116} A month later the situation had become even worse:

There is such a Cry for Bread in the Town of Boston as I suppose was never before Heard, and the Bakers deal out but a loaf a day to the largest families...In short since the late act there is very little selling. The meat that is carried to market is miserably [sic] poor, and so little of it that many people say they were as well supplied in the Seige [sic]. I am ashamed [sic] of my Country men. The Merchant and farmer are both alike. Some there are who have virtue enough to adhere to it, but more who evade it.\textsuperscript{117}

The shortages that had caused hardship were now even more serious. Rather than uniting the people, the Act had only made divisions worse. To try to prevent people from selling Massachusetts’ goods to other states, the General Court had passed another resolve preventing any one from taking goods out of Massachusetts, unless they were going to the army.\textsuperscript{118} They had done this on 7 February, only a few days after passing the Regulating Act. It did not end the crisis, but did antagonize other states that had supported Massachusetts during its difficult crises of previous years.\textsuperscript{119}

Merchants claimed the act was unfeasible because it hit their profits to such an extent that the risk of doing business was not worth the potential reward. Laboring Bostonians did not think the profits of merchants were relevant; the community was to come before the individual. The populace was not going to surrender easily in the fight against extortion. In a town meeting on 14 March, the committee intended to enforce the Regulating Act implored the CCIS to have the names of those who defied the act published in the town newspapers. The belief was that publically shaming merchants would make them sell goods at the legal prices. The CCIS, as tentative as the people feared, did not do this. It would also appear that most Bostonians did not trust the courts to enforce the act, because this option was never even discussed; it is possible Bostonians had the same fears about the elite status of the courts as they had about the CCIS. As a result, the people took the matter into their own hands through riots.

At first, these riots were far from a merely lower sort affair. Though the very wealthiest distanced themselves from the events, there is substantial evidence that many relatively well-off Bostonians involved themselves in some of the early riots of 1777. Two of them have received particular focus; the first is the April riot led by someone dressed as ‘Joyce Junior’, the lower class tailor who captured and executed English king Charles I in the English civil war of the previous century. Joyce was a popular symbol amongst laboring classes, for obvious reasons. Hence why someone posing as him, speculated to be prominent Boston merchant and CCIS-member John Winthrop, led a crowd who seized five merchants believed to be extortionists and carted them out of Boston. As discussed in the introduction, in July a crowd of women of the middling sort attacked Thomas Boylston until he agreed to sell them coffee at a

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120 For an extended defense of their practice from a merchant, see Isaac Smith Sr. to John Adams, 22 March 1777, *Founding Families*, http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?id=AFC02d137, accessed 30 September 2013. Merchant views will be discussed more in the next chapter.


reasonable price. These events show that it was not just the poor who were willing to act against extortionists; this issue cut across social strata, uniting some even as they were divided over issues such as enlistments. In an echo of the Stamp Act riots, wealthier citizens may have wanted to direct the crowd’s rage in order to keep it in check and have it serve elite purposes; this might have been why Winthrop allegedly involved himself in the Joyce Jr. riot.

However, as the conflict stretched on, riots did start to become more obviously lower class in nature. As they became more frequent and spread around Massachusetts, and into other states like New York and Connecticut, they made wealthier Bostonians more and more nervous. Meanwhile, the Regulating Act continued to be ineffective in lowering prices. Without a strong government presence to enforce the act, there was little that could be done to stop sellers defying the regulation; angry mobs were not always available. Instead, prices remained high, goods remained scarce, and there was more and more social unrest in Boston.

Abigail Adams wrote that by June 1777, many elite Bostonians had started to express dissatisfaction with the Regulating Act. In mid-1777, those arguing against the regulations expressed their views with frequency in both Boston newspapers. The writers made the prices of goods into solely an economic, apolitical issue. High prices were the result of a weak, inflated currency, high demand, and high cost of imports. It was not a matter of virtue or patriotism. Meanwhile, social unrest continued amongst the lower sort of Boston, and elsewhere in Massachusetts, and there was no

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124 There was none of the infamous 'tarring and feathering' though, as the practice had become unpopular in Boston by this time. See Benjamin H. Irvin, 'Tar, Feathers, and the Enemies of American Liberties, 1768–1776', The New England Quarterly 76, no. 2 (June 2003), pp. 197–238.
125 Smith, 'Food Rioters', p. 17.
126 Smith, 'Food Rioters', pp. 21–2.
128 For an extended discussion of these arguments and change in elite views, see second chapter.
drop in prices. Eventually, a majority of the General Court repealed the act on 13 October 1777.

Continued riots showed that the lower classes still held this issue close to heart, and had not changed their views on this issue; only elites had. This was not to be the end of the debate; another attempt at price fixing would occur in 1779, thanks to the continued demands of the middle and lower sorts, and the continued high prices. But the issue had already shown that Boston’s different economic strata had different priorities, which alienated them from each other.

Boston had dealt with severe economic strife in the final decades of the colonial era. This had been a key motivation for its resistance to the policies of the British government. But the British were not the sole source of the problems, and so getting rid of them did not end the town’s difficulties. In many ways, the Revolutionary struggle only worsened the town’s conditions; it caused serious property damage, lowered the population, and led to more social tensions and economic strife. Historians have not focused on Boston’s post-siege story; for Bostonians of the time, the struggle was far from over.

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129 Smith, ‘Food Rioters’, p. 36.
Chapter Two


‘...at such a time ought not every thing that has even the most distant tendency to weaken union or to create animosity, to be viewed with the deepest sensations of horror and indignation?’


Boston’s public discourse in 1776-77 was dominated by tension amidst uncertainty. The town had been victorious over the British, but most inhabitants did not know what that meant in reality. It was a victory without immediate reward; instead it left Boston crumbling, physically and economically. This dispirited many of the people, who had had their homes and livelihoods destroyed. In this exhausted state, fearing that the town was on the verge of collapse, the rupture lines in the community reappeared and deepened.

When the town had a common enemy in the form of the British, it was relatively easy for all views on the meaning of patriotism to be subsumed by the claim that it was primarily about the desire for ‘liberty’. In practice, desiring liberty meant wanting to overturn unjustified Acts of Parliament and remove the British army from Boston. Yet after the siege, the British had been removed and the town could shape itself in the form it desired. But people with different views no longer had a common goal to paper over their differences. Initially only disputes amongst elite patriots appeared in public discourse. However, soon it became clear the more significant divisions were between elite and non-elite Bostonians. These came to the fore in public sphere discussion of army service and price regulation. Bostonians had differing ideas about

what they owed their town, state and fledgling nation, if the latter meant anything to
them at all. This made elites very nervous; with the Massachusetts Constitution not
yet created, ideas about patriotism that gained supremacy could determine the
character of the state for years to come, and the very survival of the Revolution. In
response to these divisions, elites had a two-pronged strategy. Firstly, in early 1777
they began to push their own views on patriotism very hard in town meetings and the
newspapers. Secondly, they attempted to define views that did not suit their interests
as Toryism. This was an endeavor to recreate the common enemy that had united
Boston in the previous ten years, while ensuring the Revolution went in their
preferred direction. However, at the same time elite patriots reconsidered their views
on price regulation, resulting in an abrupt change in what was classified as Toryism.
In the consideration of these issues in the public sphere, the town revealed again
how fractured it had become; even a Revolution could not override the community's
differences.

In May 1776, less than two months after the British had evacuated Boston, the
friends and family of John Adams living in and around the town started to worry about
its lack of spirit. Abigail Adams wrote on 7 May: ‘…the eyes of our Rulers have been
closed and a Lethargy has seazd almost every Member. I fear a fatal Security has
taken possession of them.’ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 7 May 1776, Founding Families
2013.

Clergyman Samuel Cooper agreed; he felt that those
who had remained in the town during the Siege were low in spirit and that the ‘better’
citizens of Boston had not returned. Samuel Cooper to John Adams, 20 May 1776, Founding Families,
2013.

Superior court judge and Massachusetts
legislature representative James Sullivan was more damning when he stated what he
believed was wrong with the town: ‘…such a Levelling Spirit prevails even in men
called first among the Mighty, that I fear we shall finally be obliged to call in a military force to do that which Civil Government was originally designed for."  

These three wealthy citizens of the area were coming to terms with townspeople that had been through significant trauma in the past year. They recalled when the ‘spirit of ‘73’ possessed Boston, and the people were, superficially at least, united in belief and purpose. Now instead the low morale and poor state of the town reminded them of the other side of the conflict with Britain; the inability of elite patriots to control the response of lower class crowds, and the fear of where this might lead. There was a concrete manifestation of this anxiety: the drafting of the Massachusetts Constitution, which would play a major role in determining the makeup and character of Boston’s political community. However, this anxiety did not lead elites to focus on the town’s poor physical and economic conditions. Instead, it was expressed through fears that the common people lacked virtue.  

For these three writers and other people of similar station, being a virtuous citizen meant a passionate dedication to America, a concern for the well being of the town over oneself, and a respect for the town’s leaders. But the most important characteristic of a virtuous citizen was their ability to be disinterested when they considered public affairs; to be able to put aside their own concerns and desires and work for the common good. Many historians have claimed America’s intellectuals derived this idea of virtue from their understanding of the republicanism of Ancient Rome and Greece. The concept of republican virtue was highly influential on the

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way the intellectual and political elite of Boston, and America at large, viewed political and economic matters during this period, but there is little indication that it had significant influence outside of a small circle. The reason for this was that republican virtue could only benefit and work for the elite that believed in its importance; this can be seen in a further examination of the idea of disinterestedness. Disinterestedness in dealing with public affairs could supposedly only be achieved by a person not being beholden to anyone else for their livelihood. In practice, this meant only people who owned property and derived their income from that property could be considered disinterested. Only the disinterested were truly fit to comment on public affairs; this was why in the conflict over the Massachusetts Constitution in the years that followed, the Bostonian elite continued to insist on property qualifications for voters and political representatives.

Republican virtue had provided elite patriots with the ideological foundation for their conflict with Britain; but their immersion in this belief system was problematic when dealing with laboring Bostonians in 1776. It was an idea that made elites place the onus for determining conditions in Boston on the will and character of the people. It was their responsibility to improve themselves morally, engage in self-sacrifice, defer to their disinterested superiors, and work hard in the hope of one day being a disinterested citizen. Adherence to the idea of republican virtue made elites unable to comprehend the way the major turmoil of the previous year had affected the priorities and concerns of laboring Bostonians. At a time of feared British reinvasion and


Beeman, ‘Deference, Republicanism’ explains the impracticalities of republicanism, and why it never caught on outside a small circle of intellectuals.


political reform, this perceived lack of virtue worried the elite deeply. Particularly
telling is Sullivan’s comment that the army should be brought in to correct the
population. Though Sullivan may have been making the remark somewhat flippantly,
it is suggestive of the danger elites saw in a failure of virtue.

Yet not every politically active citizen of Boston was a firm believer in
republican virtue. At the same time that Sullivan, Cooper and Adams worried about
the state of the town’s people, other voices weighed in and questioned
Massachusetts’ political structures and leaders. Three essays appearing in the
Boston newspapers illustrated these alternate ideas.

The first of these essays appeared under the pseudonym Massachusettensis in
the New England Chronicle. The writer saw the separate deliberations of the
General Court and the State Council as ‘aping the two houses of parliament in the
British constitution, which is a relick of the old feudal system, which was founded in
injustice, and supported by lawless tyranny’. He wondered whether ‘acting
separately...ha[d] not a direct tendency to breed ill-will and resentment’.
Massachusettensis was also the first of several letter-writers to urge people to vote
wisely in the then-approaching elections, for he feared the possibility of the
Revolution going astray.

Two more letters of similar tone and content appeared in the month of May;
these were both in the Boston Gazette. In the 13 May edition, someone signing ‘One
of Your Number’ echoed Massachusettensis’ worries about the representatives in the

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9 It was not, however, Daniel Leonard, the Massachusetts Loyalist who had debated with
John Adams about the American cause in 1774 under this pseudonym. He had left the
country with the British at the end of the Siege, and would never have thought of writing
something like the letter that appeared in the New England Chronicle of 2 May 1776. See
Sept 2013. For Leonard’s letters and Adams’ responses, see John Adams, John Adams:
Revolutionary Writings 1755–1775, ed. by Gordon S. Wood (New York: The Library of
General Court: ‘The greater the difficulties in which a people is involved, the more attention ought to be paid to the qualifications of those who are to compose the legislature.’ The writer stated that ‘Every man who is a professed and sincere friend to his country is not qualified for a legislator.’ A person required natural and acquired abilities to fulfill such a role, and the members of the General Court did not meet this standard. ‘Demophilus’, in the 27 May edition of the Gazette, also called for the right people to be elected, but additionally feared the absence of good Patriots due to the demands of the war. He was also the first to express concern about accumulation of offices, implying there was danger in too much power being invested in individuals.

Like Abigail Adams and company, these three writers were worried about the state of their town. The difference is that, though their worry remains virtue, it was the virtue of the political elite of Boston that was the issue, not the people at large. In the view of these writers, the condition of Boston, and Massachusetts, depended on the character of the leaders and the structures within which they worked. The people, through elections, needed to keep the virtue of leaders in check. It is not clear who these writers believed ‘the people’ to be; there was no discussion of the populace itself. However, their uniform failure to discuss changes to property qualifications as a potential reform of the political system suggests they did not see a problem in that part of Massachusetts’ political structures.

11 ‘One of Your Number’, The Boston Gazette, 13 May 1776.
12 ‘Demophilus’, The Boston Gazette, 27 May 1776. The use of classical pseudonyms has been argued by Eran Shalev to be connected to republicanism, suggesting that writers like Demophilus may not have embraced the particular form of republicanism proposed by John Adams and the like, but still wanted to connect their beliefs and actions to antiquity. See Eran Shalev, ‘Ancient Masks, American Fathers: Classical Pseudonyms During the American Revolution and Early Republic’, The Journal of the Early Republic, 23, no. 2 (June 2003), pp. 151–72. The idea that Demophilus and those of similar beliefs may have been proposing another form of republicanism, focused on government structures rather than civic virtue, is given credence by Nathan R. Perl-Rosenthal, ‘The ’Divine Right of Republics’: Hebraic Republicanism and the Debate over Kingless Government in Revolutionary America’, The William and Mary Quarterly, 66, no. 3 (July 2009), pp. 535-64.
13 This was a major issue throughout the colonies; see Nash, Unknown American Revolution, pp. 264–305.
The reason these writers remained anonymous may have been because their views opened them to a charge of being ‘levelers’, a serious and damaging accusation in America at this time.\textsuperscript{14} Even though we do not know who these writers were, they indicate disagreements within the upper tiers of Boston society about what was most important to the town and state’s well being at this time. The presence of these disagreements in public forums may have added to the anxiety of the elite about conditions in Boston. At this crucial time, when the meaning of the Revolution was being determined as it was also being fought for, the ideas propagated might determine the very survival of the new political order the Revolution had created. In the back of elite patriots’ minds may have been the knowledge that the collapse of this new order could also have spelled the end of their lives; the British would presumably have prosecuted many of them for treason.

The calls of Massachusettensis and company in early 1776 were not isolated. Over the course of 1776, Boston’s newspapers continued to feature essays and letters calling for changes to the structure of Massachusetts’ government. ‘A Watchman’ wrote a two-part essay in the \textit{Chronicle} in June about the need for external defense, in the form of military defense of the town, and internal defense in the form of a constitution.\textsuperscript{15} What is unusual is that, to prevent internal tyranny, he also called for ‘EQUAL REPRESENTATION’ (author’s emphasis) of all the people of

\textsuperscript{14} Such accusations of ‘leveling’ society, or overturning the social order, may have arisen from calls for a unicameral legislature. At this time, a two-house legislature was seen as the ideal way of keeping the excesses of the people in check. See: Marc W. Kruman, \textit{Between Authority and Liberty: State Constitution Making in Revolutionary America} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 131–154.

Massachusetts and for paying legislators based on the productivity of their meetings.

‘A’ in the 11 July edition of the same paper repeated the call for separation of the offices of the executive and legislature, but also openly outlined how the virtue of the elite affected the common people: ‘If rulers are not men of virtue, little care will be taken of the morals of a people; and if these are not attended to…we may be assured that ruin will inevitably attend the state.’\(^\text{16}\)

Direct discussion of the virtue of the common people appeared less frequently. Its only explicit appearance was in the 24 October edition of the renamed *Independent Chronicle*, when ‘A’ attacked the character of New Englanders for causing a shortage of salt. ‘It were to be wished that more social virtue prevailed amongst us; it would contribute greatly to lessen our distress.’\(^\text{17}\) In 1776 at least there was no other direct attack on the virtue of ordinary people in the newspapers. However, concerns about spirit and character of the common people consistently appeared in those who corresponded with John Adams throughout 1776, over issues such as privateering, lingering beliefs in reconciliation with the British, and education.\(^\text{18}\)

But the newspapers did give evidence of distrust of the patriotism of the common people. This paranoia was evident in the way so much attention was paid to minor infractions in and around Boston that were interpreted as illustrations of a lack of loyalty in some of the populace. A prominent example was a controversy over whether the town of Barnstable voted against Independence or only did not give its General Court representatives instruction on the matter. This occurrence in a small


\(^{17}\) ‘A’, *Independent Chronicle*, 24 October 1776. The *New England Chronicle* changed its name to the *Independent Chronicle* in September 1776 following a change in printer in June.

town 70 miles south of Boston was featured three times in three months, twice on the front page of the Gazette and once in the Chronicle.\textsuperscript{19} It was not the only time such minor incidents would receive attention.\textsuperscript{20} The focus on these sorts of minor events intimates the beginning of a line of thought that would become more prominent in 1777. Part of the elite seemed to believe that all it might take was a few individuals of bad virtue and incorrect opinions to put the rest of the populace on a path that would bring down the patriot movement and prevent Boston from ever being improved. They were so worried about the potential for the town and state to be undermined that they were looking widely for the first domino. Such thinking aligned with some of the elite’s embrace of republican virtue; the philosophy made them worry about the judgment of the common people. Hence, they became paranoid about the appearance of any ‘dangerous’ ideas amongst non-elites because they feared their influence with people who lacked disinterestedness and passion for the cause.

Considering that most in the public sphere were not trying to argue for an end to property qualifications, and the direction public discourse would soon take, it is likely wealthier Bostonians that were not outright republicans held similar views. However, Toryism was not much discussed at this time; this suggests that in mid-1776, patriots were not yet sure what cracks in consensus meant for the Revolution. Was it a sign of enemies among them, or disagreements to be expected amongst members of a movement?


\textsuperscript{20} See, for example, a report on a man in Westford, 25 miles from Boston, being convicted for activities inimical to America, The Boston Gazette, 2 September 1776; a constable being beaten up in Belchertown, 80 miles west of Boston, for trying to take a fine from men who had refused to be drafted into the militia, The Boston Gazette, 11 November 1776; someone calling themselves Philagathus alerts people to a ‘certain farmer’ in Charlestown who needs to be prosecuted for aiding the British, New England Chronicle, 16 May 1776.
The town meetings were the one place where Bostonians’ conflicting viewpoints met, clashed, and left a record. Here there was a battle for power in Boston, with the middle sort siding with those who were suspicious of the political elite. Three clashes in 1776 all happened within several weeks of each other. They began in a meeting held over 26-27 August when there was a conflict, which three times led to ‘considerable’ debate, over the ability of some to hold multiple offices.\footnote{Boston Record Commissioners, \textit{Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Volume 18: Boston Town Records 1770–1777}, (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1887), pp. 241–2.}

This issue came to the fore when the town was considering who should be elected to the Committee for Correspondence, Inspection and Safety. The dispute ended with the town voting that a person could not be both a member of the General Court and a member of the CCIS; holding a military office whilst being a CCIS member was also outlawed. Though the exact specifics of the debate are not available, it is likely there was a dispute because of the prominence of the members of Boston’s CCIS. It included people such as John Hancock and Sam Adams. These were the type of well-established politicians whose virtue had been questioned in the newspapers. Hence why voters would fight to prevent such people from holding multiple offices, which could cause a conflict of interest or simply invest too much power in one individual. Yet it is unlikely such powerful people as Hancock and Adams, General Court representatives both, would have accepted being deposed; particularly if they feared the character of the people was questionable. Nonetheless, they were in fact removed from the CCIS. It is possible this clash of viewpoints only added to elite concerns about where divisions in the town might lead.

In a continuation of the same meeting on 28 August, there was another debate that reflected this same conflict.\footnote{Boston Record Commissioners, \textit{Boston Town Records}, p. 243.} An article in the agenda asked the town ‘To consider of some effectual Measures to promote Order, & a Reformation of Manners.’ The wording of this article suggests whomever had it placed in the
meeting’s warrant believed it was not the government that was causing problems in Boston’s society; it was the people, who needed to be corrected by their social betters— that is, those who held political office. A motion was put forth to have a committee appointed to consider this article, but this motion was not voted on because ‘having occasioned considerable Debate, it was the Sense of the Town, that the Question upon said Motion should not then be put.’ Much of the audience of the meeting likely took offense at this article due to it insinuating that they were all people of poor character who were destroying the fabric of Boston. Many Bostonians may have been worried about the abilities of their fellow townspeople, but such a public forum was not an appropriate place to scorn the majority of your fellow citizens, where everyone could easily learn who you were.

The conflict was to play out a third time in September, in the first of many battles over the drafting of the Massachusetts Constitution. This was the issue with the greatest long-term implications for Massachusetts and Boston, yet the formula was the same. Conservative Bostonians, this time with the backing of the General Court, proposed drafting the Constitution with the State Council. Then, after being made public ‘for the Inspection & Perusal of the inhabitants’, the Assembly would ratify their own draft. Essentially, this was an attempt by the conservative elite of Massachusetts to keep the mass of the population out of the drafting of the Constitution. This suggests that the attitudes of the Bostonian republicans were widespread amongst people of their station throughout the state. The meeting unanimously rejected the proposal; considering that non-republicans had disliked politicians holding multiple offices for fear of them gaining too much power, it is unsurprising they did not like the idea of the same people determining the makeup of the state’s politics.

Though the Boston town meetings were not welcoming to all non-elites, only those who had a certain amount of property, these three occurrences show they

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were not a place where conservative republicans could simply force their own desires to be accepted by the town’s voters. Other Bostonians, elite and more middling, had their own ideas on how their town should operate at this time, and were successful enough at advocating those ideas that they could at the very least prevent their will from being ignored. The Bostonian republicans perhaps now understood why the British had so despised the town meetings and had tried to abolish them.\(^{24}\)

After a lull in discussion over December, divisions reemerged in January 1777, but with a distinctly different tone. To understand why this was, we have to return to the issue of enlistments in the army.

As discussed in the previous chapter, October 1776 saw the beginning of an enlistment drive in Massachusetts and the creation of three-year service terms. The republican elite of Massachusetts considered enlistments to be an important gauge of the virtue of the people. It was, for some elite patriots, the most obvious way for ‘lesser’ people to put aside their personal interests in the name of self-sacrifice, and thus prove themselves to be good republican citizens. As a result, the ability to fill the armies with volunteers, or citizen soldiers, was the first big test of the independent states’ capability to be a strong republic.

A letter written by the five Massachusetts delegates to Congress in 1776 displayed the republican belief in this connection between enlistments and virtue.\(^{25}\) On 3 April the Massachusetts Delegates to Congress, John Hancock, John and Sam Adams, Robert Treat Paine and Elbridge Gerry, co-authored a letter sent to the Massachusetts State Council on the issue of enlistments in eastern Massachusetts. They initially praised all of eastern New England for discovering ‘the firmest Attachment to American Liberty and the warmest Zeal and Ardor in its Defence.’

\(^{24}\) Nash, *Unknown American Revolution*, pp. 18–25

But they immediately followed this with the warning that ‘Should they at any Time fail in this or Neglect to supply their Quota’s of Men and Arms they must in Consequence hereof be the greatest Sufferers, and may Infer on themselves the Censure of the rest of the Continent.’ In early April 1776 though, the five delegates were willing to put the enlistment troubles down to the methods for establishing the army. However, the message was clear: if this continued, it would not be treated lightly. Occasional complaints about enlistments appeared in the rest of 1776, but elite outrage only really exploded at the beginning of 1777. This is likely because of the failure of the enlistment drive, which the General Court believed could be completed by 1 December.

The *Independent Chronicle* for 2 January 1777 featured an essay titled ‘The Art of Toryism and the Dignity of Whigism,’ written by an ‘American.’ The piece tried to establish black-and-white definitions for the two groups in question. Tories, in the writer’s view, came in three types: the selfish, who would ‘sacrifice every thing social and sacred to their mean selves’; ‘the timid, who have not spirit enough to hazard any thing in the cause of virtue’; and those who ‘delight in contradiction, and in opposing every popular opinion, especially in matters of religion and liberty.’ This American then went on to claim ‘A true Whig or Patriot, is uniform in his conduct, and by words and deeds constantly testifies his firm attachment to the cause of Liberty…’ Anyone who did not measure up to the precise standards of behavior expected of Whigs was to be considered an enemy; one was either with the Whigs or against them. Many Americans did not meet these standards, and these people could and

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should be driven out so that true Whigs could ‘plant the standard of FREEDOM in every part of America.’ According to this writer, those who had previously been seen as merely lacking virtue were now to be labeled ‘Tories’ and be lumped in with truly nefarious individuals who had no desires except to undermine society.

This American was far from alone in early 1777; both Boston newspapers suddenly overflowed with this same style of aggressive rhetoric. Attacks on the virtue of the people were much more prominent and aggressive; they were also more likely to come with accusations of Toryism. Attacks on the governance of Boston and Massachusetts disappeared.

This change in the tone of the public sphere can be seen in the newspapers over the following five months. ‘The Spectator’, who wrote several essays appearing in the Gazette in January and February, drew a direct connection between moderates and enlistment problems:

> When an army is to be raised by order of Congress, or an act is made by the General Assembly, though every one confesses that the execution of it is necessary to the defence of the country, yet how many evasions and how much exercise of cunning are there to render it null, as if the people at large had no interest in the matter?²⁸

In this period there were also pieces in both papers urging people who had not joined the army to do so in order to share in the glory and contribute to the cause.²⁹

The Spectator and other writers claimed Tories in their midst were a threat because they might sway the more ‘timid’ amongst the populace to think about reconciliation with the British.³⁰ The timid continued to be spoken of with great hostility, for if they were not already supporting the British their mere presence was destroying society, making them as bad as Tories. Another article entitled ‘Thoughts on the Times,’ also attributed to an ‘American,’ outright stated ‘He that loves himself more than his country, is an enemy wherever he lives, and ought to be banished

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²⁸ ‘The Spectator’, The Boston Gazette, 3 February 1777.
²⁹ ‘A brother soldier’, The Boston Gazette, 6 January 1777.
A writer calling himself Oliver Cromwell blamed these men for all of the problems Boston and America at large were facing at this time, including problems in the army and the economy. He went as far to say these people, as they had ‘two tongues’ and were not men of spirit or principle, should not be allowed to vote in elections.

While less extreme, both John and Abigail Adams had developed similarly low opinions of Boston by this time. John had gone home to Braintree for the winter, and had spent time in Boston during this period. In January 1777, when he travelled back to Philadelphia, he consistently compared Boston unfavourably to the other towns he visited. In Fish Kill on 18-19 January, he said ‘I don’t find one half of the Discontent, nor of the Terror here that I left in Massachusetts’; he found the population ‘Zealous against the Tories, who have not half the Tranquility here that they have in the Town of Boston…’ In April, Abigail expressed similar opinions; ‘As to the Town of Boston I cannot give you any very agreeable account of it. It seems to be really destitute of the Choice Spirits which once inhabited it.’ These echo her statements in 1776, but Abigail’s tone suggests she thinks even less of the town in 1777.

For the elite of Boston, the initial failure of the enlistment drive was a confirmation of their worst fears about the people. Their lack of virtue meant they could not be trusted to do their duty and give the sacrifice their new country needed; they had not just ruined Boston, they were ruining America at large as well. Even

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32 ‘Oliver Cromwell’, The Boston Gazette, 28 April 1777.
elites of a less republican bent were dispirited by 'proof' that their underlying anxiety about their fellow Bostonians was well founded. This can be seen in the fact that attacks on governance disappeared during these months from both the newspapers and the town meetings. There was no consideration of the many good reasons for why people might not be so keen to serve; a lack of patriotism, which was proof of a lack of virtue, was the only explanation considered.

Yet now people were not just lacking spirit or virtue; they might have been outright Tories. Tories were split into two groups: genuine Tories who were believed to be actively working to undermine the state; and those who simply lacked virtue. This latter group was now thought to be as harmful to society as Tories and could easily be convinced to become active Tories. There were reasons for the sudden fear of Toryism at the turn of 1777 aside from elite alarm at events in Boston. It may have been representative of a new confidence, developed in the months following the Declaration of Independence, in the strength of the new, revolutionary, post-British political order.36 Having declared where they stood in relation to Britain, patriot leaders now wanted to define the characteristics people of this new political order should have. As they wanted to create an ideal republican state full of virtuous citizens, a person lacking virtue was now considered to be working against the state, and therefore was thought to be able to slip into Toryism with ease. Distrust of the patriotism of the people meant those less committed to republicanism did not object to this hardline stance.

But the rise in discussion of Toryism signified more than this. It was also a response to the breakdown of the 'patriot consensus', seen in differing views over the constitution, government, and virtue.37 Having been at the centre of unrest in the previous decade, Boston had also been one of the places where a split between pro-

36 David James Kiracofe, 'Dr. Benjamin Church and the Dilemma of Treason in Revolutionary Massachusetts', *The New England Quarterly*, 70, no. 3 (September 1997), pp. 443-62.
British and anti-British people had occurred most rapidly and with greatest force.\textsuperscript{38} Bostonian patriots were able to ensure unity amongst their movement by having prominent opponents they could define themselves against, including government officials, conspicuous merchants and of course the occupying British army. Patriots frequently attacked their opponents, physically and verbally. Post-siege, however, they lacked these obvious local opponents they could define themselves in opposition to; consequently, anti-British sentiment could not override divisions within the patriot movement. Elite patriots were fearful that divisions could lead the Revolution in directions that did not suit their interests, such as increased laboring class participation in government. In response patriots in early 1777 tried to reconstruct the Tory enemy, and accused those who did not act in accordance with elite desires of Toryism. This was a way of delegitimising opposition and ensuring their own power.

Where this particularly became clear was in the attempt to prosecute Tories through the town meetings. Because distrust focused on the common people, there was a greater sense of unity in the town meetings at this time. Prosecution of Tories began on 14 March with the formation of a committee ‘To consider what Steps are necessary to prevent the Inconvenience & Danger that may happen from persons resorting to, or residing in the town, who are justly suspected of being inimical to the American States.’\textsuperscript{39} The committee reported back that another committee of 12 people, one for each of the town’s wards, should be formed to take the names of all the people who had come to live in Boston since 19 April 1775. The new committee was also asked to take the names of refugees and ‘other disaffected Persons’ who


\textsuperscript{39} Boston Record Commissioners, \textit{Boston Town Records}, p. 275.
were in the town, and what town they were from, if they are ‘justly suspected of being inimical to the States of America…’

The choice of the first day of the siege as the cutoff point was significant for two reasons. The practical reason it was chosen was because of the influx of Loyalists from around Massachusetts, who had sought safety with the British at the beginning of the siege. Many of these people had left with the British at the end of the siege, but as ‘A Plain Countryman’ had expressed back in April 1776 after the siege had just ended, a suspicion lingered that not all of the Loyalists had left. Yet the choice of the siege’s start date was also an attempt to retroactively assert the power of the newly independent Boston. As the day on which Britain and America finally became enemies at war with each other, 19 April 1775 was also the day those sympathetic to the British became dangerous enemies, even though the colonies did not declare independence until almost seventeen months later. At least some Bostonians now considered 19 April 1775 to be the day a new America began to come into being, and anyone who had been against this order in April 1775 had to be cast out for the good of Boston and America at large. Take away the outright Tories, and the moderates and the timid people in Boston could be swayed to ‘patriotism’ and ‘virtue’- at least, the elite definition of such things. A truly virtuous America could then emerge. Economic decline, property destruction, demoralizing experiences of war and several decades of tough times did not seem to be as important to the town’s state, in the eyes of those at this town meeting, as the evil Tory individuals allowed to dwell in Boston.

This issue re-emerged in early May, when a belief that the British were about to attack led to a panicked attempt to specifically name the Tories in Boston and put them on trial. The committee established in March produced a list of twenty-nine supposed Tories. These people were, indeed, known to be loyal to Britain. Some

40 Ibid., pp. 276–7.
41 Ibid., pp. 281–2.
had defied nonimportation agreements, worked for the British in the previous decade, or did so at that point in time. A number had also signed an open letter in the *New England Chronicle* of 26 October 1775 mourning then-Massachusetts Royal Governor Gage’s passage to Britain. Yet they were hardly a threatening bunch; Mather Byles was a sick old man who, denied of his pastorship, lived on the charity of fellow loyalists. Benjmain Davis and his son, as well as William Jackson, had both tried to leave the town with the British at the end of the siege, but circumstances led both of them to end up back in Boston, penniless. They had already been imprisoned at the time of this meeting, as had William Perry and Patrick Wall. Samuel Danforth and James Lloyd were allowed to remain in the town because they were medical doctors; Tories were still preferable to disease. It seems unlikely these men, many of them well into middle age, could have led any sort of rebellion. However, that was not the point for patriotic Bostonians; the words and very presence of these loyalists were potentially poisonous. They could sway the moderates and neutrals into supporting Britain again. The virtue of Bostonians was believed to be weak; it would not take much to push them back into the arms of Britain.

Benjamin Edes also used his paper, *The Boston Gazette*, to attempt to reunify the patriot movement by means other than printing aggressive rhetoric. He twice gave significant room to pieces that tried to justify the patriot cause. One of these, written by ‘An Independent Whig’ spread across no less than seven issues of the *Gazette* from March to April 1777, taking up entire pages of a four-page newspaper. This Independent Whig used the writings of the former Massachusetts

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42 For examples, see Alfred E. Jones, *The Loyalists of Massachusetts* (London: St. Catherine Press, 1930), pp. 130, 178, 234, 295
43 *New England Chronicle*, 26 October 1775.
46 Ibid., pp. 234, 287–8
47 Ibid., pp. 112, 197
Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson to show that Hutchinson did have anti-American sentiment and so the rebellion against him was justified. The other piece following the same theme appeared in the midst of Hutchinson’s letters. Titled ‘A New Catechism’, it may have been written by Edes himself. In question and answer format, the basic facts of the war with Britain and the justification for it were laid out. It was essentially a simplified, direct version of what the ‘Independent Whig’ was trying to show. It positioned America as the victim of men launching a war of aggression, and America as only defending itself. The chief purpose of an offensive war, which the British were conducting, ‘for the most part, is to gratify the ambition of a tyrannic Prince, by subjecting to his arbitrary will a people whom God had created free…’ By contrast a defensive war, as America was at the time conducting, ‘is the taking up arms to resist tyrannic power, and bravely suffering present hardships and encountering present dangers, to secure lasting liberty, property and life, to future generations.’ Edes’ purpose in including these pieces was to redirect the hostility and anger felt by his readers back on to the British and away from fellow Bostonians. He was trying to contribute to the attempt to define the boundaries of the patriot movement, as the elites had been doing, but in a way that focused attention on the external enemies that all Bostonians shared, rather than on the ambiguities of the proclaimed standards of patriotism that were tearing Boston apart. By restating the cause of America clearly and directly in this way, Edes hoped to recapture the pre-Siege unity of the town. Nonetheless, he continued to publish essays, articles and letters feeding the hostility of his fellow Bostonians. This is unsurprising; he was a businessman who had to please his readership, particularly in economically difficult times.

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49 Hutchinson was frequently used as a figure against which American Patriots defined themselves. See: Peter Shaw, *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 26–47.

50 *The Boston Gazette*, 31 March 1777.
What sustained public sphere hostility for five months was the fact that the enlistment quota was not filled until May 1777. The virtue of the people may be lacking, but surely it would only take a small amount of incentive to coax them into service of the cause. But despite ever-increasing bounties, laws to prevent those who enlisted from being arrested for small debts, and promises of being able to keep whatever plunder was taken from the enemy, the quota was filled almost six months later than expected.\textsuperscript{51}

Abigail Adams, as well as Adams family friend and physician Cotton Tufts, reported multiple times with disappointment that enlistments were only coming along very slowly.\textsuperscript{52} James Warren complained that rather than simply enlist, many men were trying to push bounties as high as possible, slowing the filling of the quota.\textsuperscript{53}

John Adams himself was furious that the state that had experienced British tyranny so strongly was not committing itself to the fight. In April 1777, he wrote: “Every Man of the Massachusetts Quota ought to have been ready last December. And not one Man has yet arrived in the Field…”\textsuperscript{54}

But these worries also went deeper; having to establish a standing army already showed that the country would not be able to put their trust in citizen soldiers doing everything they could to fight the enemy. Trying to enlist men for three years,


Orders from George Washington appearing in \textit{The Boston Gazette}, 3 February 1777.


and giving incentives like high bounties and being kept out of debtor prison, was an indication that the army tried to enlist those who had always done most of the fighting in colonial America: the poor. The political elite, and possibly much of the middling sort, likely thought that if they could not rely on the militia, they could always easily get the lowest of Boston society to fight for the army. This had been common practice in the past. This would have looked like a particularly straightforward option because plenty of evidence had been given in the previous decade, through their response to British oppression, that the lower sort of Bostonians had also developed a strong political consciousness. Combine patriotic feeling with a little bit more economic incentive, elites thought, and then, at a time of war and limited economic opportunity, surely the poor could easily be won over.

The difficulty in winning over the poor agitated wealthier Bostonians. It made them wonder whether the war could actually be fought, and whether they needed to do more about Tories in case they were the ones talking the poor out of serving. More than this though, the enlistment difficulties made the elite fear the level of agency the lower sort were showing. At the same time that this was happening, Bostonians were beginning to riot over food prices and scarcity. Elites could not be sure the Revolution was not going to be led ‘astray’ and defeated. Hence, elite patriots continued to fill the newspapers with denunciations of Toryism; if they changed the discourse around patriotism, more would feel pressured into service.

Discussion of government, including the forming of a Constitution, faded significantly in these months. The few mentions of the Constitution suggest that it remained an important issue to Boston patriots, but of lesser importance than the virtue of the people at that point in time. A writer using the pseudonym ‘Phileleutherus’ proposed an extremely detailed draft for the Constitution in the 6

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March edition of the *Chronicle*. This inspired a number of sharp reactions from people in Boston, including Abigail Adams and the Reverend William Gordon. The primary reason for why it proved so offensive to some is due to Phileleutherus’ suggestion that the executive branch be entirely subservient to the legislature; this idea offended republican elites like Adams and Gordon afraid of the uncontrollable will of the people. The reaction to Phileleutherus also suggests that, even when not talking about Tories or the army, public discourse in Boston had generally become more hostile at this point. Responding under the name ‘Philadelphus’ in the 17 April 1777 edition of the *Chronicle*, a writer accuses Phileleutherus of being the ‘most designing and subtil enemy that America has in the Massachusetts.’ This suggests how patriots also took a hard stance on what sort of governing structure was acceptable in their ideal America.

There was an irony to the attempts of Boston’s patriot elite to declare a failure to enlist in the army as a failure of virtue and patriotism. In the same period, elites tried to redefine the significance of economic activity to the patriot movement. To see this, we have to return to the Regulating Act.

As discussed in the previous chapter, a connection between prices and patriotism had been established by the conflicts with Britain in the previous decade. The wording of the Regulating Act confirmed this connection by saying it was necessary to secure the ‘liberties of America’. Newspaper essays also emphasised this connection, as seen in two pieces in the *Chronicle* of 13 February 1777, less than three weeks after the act had been passed. A letter from ‘Neither a Merchant

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Nor a Farmer’ claimed that the act was good because it would show loyal patriots that setting high prices was doing ‘the drudgery of their enemies’, the Tories.\footnote{‘Neither a Merchant nor a Farmer’, \textit{Independent Chronicle}, 13 February 1777.} Understanding, thanks to the Regulating Act, that setting high prices was a threat to the liberties of America, merchants and farmers would set their prices at reasonable levels. The writer also blamed the Tories for setting the merchants and farmers against each other by spreading rumours amongst each that it was the other who was extorting the people. A letter signed by ‘Philo-patrie’ appeared directly under the piece by ‘Neither a Merchant Nor a Farmer’ and had the same subject.\footnote{‘Philo-patrie’, \textit{Independent Chronicle}, 13 February 1777.} However, this writer was unforgiving of those who opposed the act; ‘I am surprized to find that some amongst us, from whom better things might have been expected, oppose this salutary law, and thereby become enemies to their country.’ These two writers were trying to help quickly establish a patriot consensus on the issue of high prices with the passing of the Regulating Act; setting unfair prices in order to gain individual profit was now to be declared a Tory action. Those who had engaged in it before were mistaken; those who continued to engage in the act would be considered Tories. As with army enlistments, elite patriots were attempting to establish an unambiguous position on price regulation that was meant to clearly define who was a patriot and who was a Tory. Unlike the army enlistments issue, it is likely most in Boston would have agreed.

The Boston town meeting endorsed this interpretation when the thirty-six-man committee intended to assist in the enforcement of the Regulating Act recommended that the town write letters to other towns assuring them that Boston would sell goods at prices set by the Act.\footnote{Boston Record Commissioners, \textit{Boston Town Records}, pp. 262–3.} These letters needed to be written in order ‘to prevent any Misunderstanding by false Reports spread by the Tory Party…’ This was a blatant attempt to make a belief in the primacy of fairness in economic activity, over unregulated freedom of action, a crucial part of being a patriot. However, establishing
a consensus was not so simple; the different beliefs amongst Bostonians about how the economy should operate were about to reemerge and come into direct conflict.

As discussed in the previous chapter, it soon became clear that the Regulating Act did not work without a substantial government infrastructure to enforce prices; instead it led to increasingly lower class riots. Merchants saw these events very differently from the lower sort, as outlined by merchant Isaac Smith Sr. to John Adams. Writing from Boston, Smith argued that he was already offering goods at only a 5% profit to himself, which he claimed was necessary ‘for doing business without any resque...A great many of the present House...thinks a person concern'd in trade, what he has comes is all gains...’ The implication was that if he sold goods at the prices set by the General Court, he would be losing money. In Smith’s view, the reason the Regulating Act could not work in Massachusetts was that it needed to be enacted by Congress and apply to all the states. This was because merchants were buying goods from other states, and colonies, where there were no price limits, and then bringing them back to Massachusetts. This also meant transport costs, which could be variable, particular if merchants were importing goods from the Caribbean. People like Smith felt the price limits bore no relation to the realities of importing goods; unless the profit was reasonable, merchants believed it was not worth the risk and effort to try importing goods to the Massachusetts market. Decades of involvement in Atlantic trade and growing international capitalism had made beliefs in economic justice irrelevant and incomprehensible to some of Boston’s merchants. Yet it was not an option for Massachusetts to not have imports; the state was not self-sufficient, and was in fact increasingly reliant on imports. Some merchants, aware of the demand for imports, continued to import goods; they just ignored the price limits. Farmers were involved in this equation because they bought goods from merchants,

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and in turn sold their produce and goods in the towns where merchants lived. If farmers had to pay higher prices for imported goods, they felt the need to raise prices on their produce to maintain their own profit margins. It is unclear whether farmers had developed the same beliefs about the functioning of the economy as had merchants; what is clear is that the people of Boston believed farmers were also extorting the people. However, as farmers could not be found in the centre of Boston, they did not feel the town’s fury to the same extent.

Boston’s merchants found themselves hitting the same limits of loyalty that potential soldiers were running into in this same period. Other members of society believed merchants’ obligations to the Patriot cause were set at a standard that merchants believed was unfeasible. The result was internal hostility, a crumbling economy, and significant hardship for the people of Boston.

But soon elite opinion started to turn in favour of the merchants. This is likely because merchants were a significant part of Boston’s elite; therefore, they could easily express their opinions to prominent politicians, as Isaac Smith did to John Adams. It is also likely much of Boston’s elite had also had experience with the opening Atlantic economy, and lost contact with ideas of economic justice. Thus, they were already open to merchants’ arguments. Also, food riots were creating an unstable state of affairs while elites were trying to make laboring Bostonians join the continental army. This made elites nervous and soon wealthier Bostonians started to speak out against the legislation. John Adams, a safe three hundred miles away in

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64 Hoerder, Crowd Action, pp. 353–4.
65 For example, John Hancock was not just a prominent politician; he had also been the heir to a major fortune and owned significant property in Boston. See: Gregory H. Nobles, “Yet the Old Republicans Still Persevere”: Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and the Crisis of Popular Leadership in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1775–1790', in The Transforming Hand of the Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement, ed. by Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1996), pp. 258–85.
Philadelphia, expressed his opposition to the act as early as 6 April, in a letter to his wife Abigail, just two months after the bill was made law:

> The Act, my dear, that you were so fond of will do no good. Legislatures cannot effect Impossibilities. I detest all Embargoes, and all other Restraints upon Trade. Let it have its own Way, in such a Time as this and it will cure its own Diseases.  

Adams’ claim was the strategy many wealthy Bostonians would use to put a dampener on the regulation; high prices were the result of the market and the currency, not individual people. Effectively, as Barbara Clark Smith notes, elite Bostonians tried to sever the connection between patriotism and prices in order to take the political ramifications out of the issue. Openly assisting the enemy was still Toryism; but wealthy patriots now wanted self-interest disassociated from supporting the British. Patriotism was being redefined in a way that suited the interests of wealthier patriots who benefitted from increased inter-state and international trade. The double standard in wanting the self-interest of the economic elite excused, while that of poorer Bostonians who refused to join the Continental army was not, did not occur to these patriots.

The first time wealthier Bostonians publically questioned the Regulating Act was at a town meeting held on 22 May. Here it would appear merchants made a concerted effort to dominate the meeting, for there had been no talk against the act in the town meetings before this point. At this meeting there was a call for the act to be immediately repealed in the General Court. These instructions were given to Boston’s General Court representatives in a continuation of the same meeting on 26 May; these representatives were elected and re-elected on the 22nd, and as was customary a committee prepared a document of instructions for them. This was the justification for desiring the repeal of the Regulating act:

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68 Boston Record Commissioners, *Boston Town Records*, p. 283.
...they are (however well designed) a growing Source of Animosity & ill Will, tending to raise a Difference between Town & Country, at this – important Crisis, an Event ardently wished for by our Enemies, but ought to be guarded against with the utmost Caution by every Friend to his Country...  

The five writers of this piece did not just try to separate prices and patriotism; they suggested that supporting the act helped the enemy. They went on to say that the acts in fact caused high prices because they were preventing the importing of goods, thus artificially lowering supply.

... For it has been a known & acknowledged Truth, by all Nations, which were wise enough to encourage Commerce, that Trade must regulate itself; can never be clogged but to its ruin; & always flourishes when left alone...  

This was a new definition of what was Toryism and what was patriotic; patriotism was not supporting the community, but ensuring individual rights. Trying to restrict the economic rights of the individual and prevent free trade encouraged Toryism. Significantly, one of the five men who wrote this letter to the legislatures was John Winthrop, the same merchant who may have played the role of Joyce Junior only a month earlier in a Boston food riot. This may suggest that Winthrop had quickly found his antics could not quiet or control the crowds angered by high prices. Now he wanted to get rid of the law that caused unrest. He may have been indicative of the way many patriots very quickly changed their views on this issue when they realized where their interests lay.

As had been the case in the pre-war stage of the conflict with Britain, crowds had made elite Bostonians nervous. However, in this instance elites realized that they did not need to tolerate the crowd, because they saw a new way of serving their own interests. They did not have the means to stop the crowd through force, but they could turn the law against them and try to take the sting out of crowd action by denying that the crowd was in the right. For some of Boston’s wealthier citizens, this

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69 Ibid., pp. 284–5.
70 Ibid., p. 285.
was another step away from a belief in economic fairness, and one more step toward economic liberalism.\textsuperscript{71}

When a vote was taken in the Massachusetts General Court on 16 June on whether to repeal the act, it was voted against by 121 to 31 votes. It may have been losing popularity amongst some wealthier parts of Boston, but price regulation still had support elsewhere in Massachusetts. Over the following few months though, those arguing against the regulations expressed their views frequently in both Boston newspapers.\textsuperscript{72} The arguments were fundamentally the same as those made in the May town meeting: the writers made the prices of goods into solely an economic, apolitical issue. High prices were the result of a weak, inflated currency, high demand, and high cost of imports. It was not a matter of virtue or patriotism. Meanwhile, social unrest continued amongst the lower sort of Boston, and elsewhere in Massachusetts, and there was no drop in prices.\textsuperscript{73} Eventually, the act was repealed in October 1777.\textsuperscript{74}

At the same time that patriot leaders attacked laboring Bostonians for being hesitant about serving in the army, they redefined patriotism so that their own actions could not be interpreted as Toryism. Over the first half of 1777, the patriot consensus that had temporarily united Bostonians against the British cracked significantly, if it did not break altogether. Elite patriots were trying to wrestle control of this new political order away from the laboring classes.

Despite the move amongst the political and economic elite against price regulation, some Bostonians continued to defend the regulations by means other than rioting. ‘Z’ in the \textit{Chronicle} of 12 June pleaded with the General Court to make sellers

\textsuperscript{71} For a similar interpretation of price fixing regulations, see Daniel Mandell, ‘Revolutionary Ideologies and Wartime Economic Regulation’, (prepared for Boston Area Early American History Seminar, Massachusetts Historical Society, 19 February 2013).

\textsuperscript{72} ‘A Countryman’, \textit{The Boston Gazette}, 16 June 1777.


\textsuperscript{74} Smith, \textit{Freedoms We Lost}, p. 167.
take actual currency rather than barter with rum, salt, sugar and molasses. In the 26 June edition of the same paper, ‘Amicus Patriae’ claimed to speak on behalf of the soldiers of America in asking for the General Court to keep the Regulating Act:

…shall our wives and children starve at home, while our bodies become the bulwark of the States? Your regulating bill, we confess, inspired; thus we became the Publick’s.
—THEN MAINTAIN YOUR WORD, WHILE WE DEFEND YOU. (Italics and capitals from source)

Before the end of the year, ‘A Dialogue between a Poor Widow and an Honest Farmer’ attacked the greed of farmers who attempted to benefit from the weakened currency. These people fought a losing battle in this instance, but these letters showed that not all had turned against regulation. There were to be more food riots in Boston during the latter part of 1777, and during 1778. The lack of an alternative measure for lessening hardship likely encouraged this. In particular, Amicus Patriae proved correct in his fears for the families of soldiers; in November 1777 it was reported to the town that nearly 500 people who had family members in the Continental army were suffering severe destitution. Wealthier Bostonians may have turned toward a belief in the economic rights of an individual as sacrosanct, but the laboring class still believed fairness and concern for community should outweigh individual profit. This issue had not yet been resolved.

The town had worked itself up into a frenzied state, but it did not last. As discussed in the previous chapter, once again the catalyst was the enlistment issue. The rumoured return of the British in May inspired the filling of Boston’s quota, putting an end to that issue for the time being. A draft would not be necessary. The rhetoric about the virtue of the people ended around this time. Meanwhile, a Constitution drafting committee had been formed in June as part of the yearly

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77 *The Boston Gazette*, 8 December 1777.
78 Boston Record Commissioners, *Boston Town Records*, p. 293.
elections, but they were not to report back until January 1778.\textsuperscript{79} The elites who pushed for a more conservative approach hoped to wait out those with more radical ideas. This did not mean the issue went far from the hearts of the people, and it remained a controversial matter in the newspapers. In the \textit{Chronicle} in July, a writer under the name of ‘Clitus’ caused controversy for several weeks when he suggested a form of constitution that was ‘easy, simple and cheap’.\textsuperscript{80} It involved a unicameral legislature, wide suffrage and a weak executive branch. ‘A Faithful Friend to His Country’ accused him of sowing internal discord and being prompted by ‘evil spirits’ a few weeks later.\textsuperscript{81} Passions could still run high when this issue was discussed, but with no new developments to comment on, it was put on pause for the most part.

Attention was drawn from the virtue of the people by the loss of Ticonderoga in July 1777.\textsuperscript{82} This caused a great flurry of concern in the newspapers; a number of accounts were published disputing the condition of the soldiers, knowledge of conditions in the Fort, and the extent to which this loss endangered America.\textsuperscript{83} The newspapers even caught the attention of General St. Clair, who accused the publishers of both newspapers of printing lies in a letter that appeared in the \textit{Chronicle}.\textsuperscript{84} He also attacked a prominent \textit{Chronicle} writer who named himself Marcus Brutus. Brutus was outraged at the government’s running of the war, and saw Ticonderoga as a direct result of its incompetence.\textsuperscript{85} Brutus also wrote that it was not an appropriate time for the formation of a Constitution, because all attention needed to be focused on the war. The controversy of Ticonderoga raged on in both newspapers until victory at Saratoga in October.\textsuperscript{86} There was also another rumored invasion in August, of which Abigail Adams wrote: ‘We have never since the

\textsuperscript{79} Nash, \textit{Unknown}, pp. 294–6.
\textsuperscript{80} ‘Clitus’, \textit{Independent Chronicle}, 10 July 1777.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{The Boston Gazette}, 21 July–22 September 1777.
\textsuperscript{84} General St. Clair, \textit{Independent Chronicle}, 29 August 1777.
\textsuperscript{85} ‘Marcus Brutus’, \textit{Independent Chronicle}, 17 July 1777.
Evacuation of Boston been under apprehensions of an invasion from them equal to what we suffered last week. All Boston was in confusion, packing up and carting out of Town, Household furniture, military stores, goods &c. With concerns that their imminent safety was threatened, Bostonians become more worried about military matters than the virtue of the people and Toryism. The town meetings also reflected how attention had been drawn to matters outside of Boston and away from internal issues: only two meetings were held after July.

The Bostonian laboring classes had never been the playthings of the elite, and they displayed the extent of their independence in the two years after the siege. To ordinary Bostonians, patriotism was about the primacy of the community and its well being over all other considerations. They did not think in terms of an inter-state or national cause; other parts of America only existed in words. The elite of Boston did not understand this perspective, and do not seem to have tried to do so. At the same time, elite opinions on economic justice were changing, furthering the gap between them and laboring Bostonians. When it became clear that these divisions could be bad for elite interests, they began to move discourse around patriotism in a direction that suited them. There is no indication that the elite convinced the laboring classes to change their views on army enlistment and price regulation, at least not in the short term. But as elites held most of the power in Boston and Massachusetts at large, that hardly mattered in 1776-77. Boston did not move into its future a united community, but collapsed into the state of division that had dogged the town in the mid-eighteenth century.

Conclusion

Boston’s trials were not over with the close of 1777. The Constitution would not be ratified until 1780, and only then because the government and economy of Massachusetts was on the verge of collapse. Another failed attempt at price regulation would be made in 1779, this time alongside several other states. The town’s economic and population difficulties would only turn around, and slowly, with the end of the Revolutionary War.¹

Yet circumstances had changed by the end of 1777. The Revolutionary War moved south after the British defeat at Saratoga. Boston, already not seriously considered a military target by the American army, became even more distant from the war.² Meanwhile, the controversies around army enlistment and price regulation signaled the direction of the Revolution in the years to come, in Boston and America more widely. Elites would increasingly wrest control of the discourse around patriotism. They would move its definition, and the focus of the Revolution, away from laboring class concerns and toward elite interests. To ensure their legitimacy while doing this, they demonized those who disagreed as Tories. Elites threw aside price regulation and embraced free trade. They would use the Massachusetts Constitution to limit democracy for the laboring classes. Crucial movements in Boston’s discourse can be seen in events in the town in the twenty-one months after the siege.³

¹ See Jacqueline Barbara Carr, After the Siege: A Social History of Boston, 1775–1800 (Boston: Northeastern University Publisher, 2005).
³ Other parts of Massachusetts also reacted negatively to these movements in the Revolution, most famously in Shay’s Rebellion. See John L. Brooke, 'To the Quiet of the People: Revolutionary Settlements and Civil Unrest in Western Massachusetts, 1774–1789’, The William and Mary Quarterly, 46, no. 3 (July 1989), pp. 425-62; Gregory H. Nobles, “Satan, Smith, Shattuck, and Shays”: The People’s Leaders in the Massachusetts Regulation of 1786', in Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the
Elite action in Boston in the late 1770s was ultimately reflective of the direction of the Revolution as a whole. Barbara Clark Smith sees the first ‘patriot consensus’ collapsing across America in this period; a second consensus, less amenable to laboring class interests, was formed in the 1780s.\(^4\) Gary Nash and Terry Bouton have argued that the Revolution was ‘tamed’ over the 1776–87 period, as conservative patriot elites claimed control and tried to sideline non-elites.\(^5\) They, and others, have contended that elite power over the Revolution culminated in the United States Constitution, a document intended to limit rather than ensure democracy.\(^6\)

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that Boston pulled itself out of this difficult period. In spite of its physical state, low population, collapsed economy, wealth disparity, and social tensions, it remained a functioning town. However, even as it grew substantially bigger in the coming years, its slow decline in status was to continue.\(^7\) Yet in 1776-77 it would have been understandable if Bostonians saw its state as signifying the town’s final descent, after decades of troubles, into political and economic irrelevancy, social disorder and physical ruin. It was in no way clear that circumstances were going to improve; the Declaration of Independence was not the end of the story. The internal political, economic and social negotiations between different parts of the town, particularly those involving enlistments and price regulation, were drawn out and fraught with tension and setbacks. Its earlier

resistance and eventual recovery should not make historians underestimate the difficulty of this period in Boston’s history.
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