

The Urban Crucible

*The Northern Seaports and the Origins
of the American Revolution*

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The Stamp Act

Chapter 6

ONLY THE ECONOMIC buffeting suffered by the seaport towns after 1760 and the buildup of antagonisms on local issues can fully explain the extraordinary response to the Stamp Act. Likewise, only the social circumstances and previous political experience of each city can explain the striking contrast between Philadelphia's reaction to the Stamp Act and those of Boston and New York.

The Stamp Act crisis in the cities also provides a key to the course of revolutionary politics in the years that followed. The extraordinary disturbances in the northern cities show dramatically how discontent over England's tightening of the screws on her American colonies merged with resentment over local events. In 1765 the first signals of the dual revolution appeared. The defiance of authority and destruction of property by people from the lower social ranks redefined the dynamics of urban politics and initiated a ten-year internal struggle for political control among the various social elements protesting English rule. The mass disorders surrounding the Stamp Act revealed to many in the urban patriciate the ghastly logic of four generations of political development in the American commercial centers and convinced them that the enemy within was as dangerous as the enemy without.

Crowd Action in Boston

The Boston press had been filled for months with reports of the impending stamp duties. Parliament's intention in passing the Stamp Act was to make the Americans share the cost of keeping 10,000 British regulars in North America as guardians of the frontiers and to remind the ill-disciplined colonial subjects that they were still beholden to the mother country. No amount of colonial lobbying had altered Parliament's decision to put the Stamp Act in force on November 1, 1765.

In an impoverished town whose tax burden was already by far the greatest in the British empire, the additional stamps, required on every newspaper, pamphlet, almanac, legal document, liquor license, college diploma, and pack of playing cards, were highly unpopular.

At dawn on August 14, Bostonians awoke to find a rag-clad effigy of stamp distributor Andrew Oliver hanging from a huge elm tree at the crossing of Essex and Orange streets in the South End. Dangling beside it was an effigy representing two men close to the king who were thought to have played the largest role in fashioning the detested new imperial policies—the earl of Bute, the king's trusted adviser, and George Grenville, first lord of the Treasury.

When Sheriff Stephen Greenleaf attempted to cut down the effigies at the order of Chief Justice Hutchinson, he was surrounded by an animated crowd. All day the town buzzed with rumors. Every farmer bringing produce into town was detained by the crowd until he had got his goods 'stamped.' At the end of working hours, a mass of working men began to form for a mock funeral. Their leader was Ebenezer MacIntosh, a twenty-eight-year-old shoemaker who knew poverty at first hand. His mother had died when he was fourteen and his father, for years a part of the tramping poor of eastern Massachusetts, had been warned out of Boston two years later, in 1753, although he had served as a soldier at Castle William in the 1730s and 1740s.

With MacIntosh acting as leader, the crowd cut down Oliver's effigy as dark came on and headed toward the South End wharves, where Oliver had built a brick office in July, rumored to be the place from which stamps would be distributed. It took less than thirty minutes to level the building. The timbers were "stamped" in derision of the Stamp Act and carried to Oliver's luxurious house at the foot of Fort Hill. At nightfall they were used to start a bonfire atop the hill. Oliver's brother-in-law Thomas Hutchinson tried to reason with the people, by now in high spirits and completely unopposed, but his appearance only maddened the crowd, which began to destroy Oliver's stable and his coach and chaise. Finally the mob tore into Oliver's house, breaking windows and looking glasses, demolishing the elegant furniture, emptying the contents of the splendidly stocked wine cellar, and tearing up the gardens. Oliver promptly asked to be relieved of his commission as stamp distributor.

Twelve days later it was Thomas Hutchinson's turn. The crowd warmed up by attacking the luxurious houses of William Story, deputy register of the Vice-Admiralty Court, and Benjamin Hallowell, comp-

troller of customs. Then they moved across town to Hutchinson's mansion. Catching the chief justice and his family at the dinner table, the crowd smashed in the doors with axes, sent the family packing, and then systematically reduced the furniture to splinters, stripped the walls bare, chopped through inner partitions until the house was a hollow shell, destroyed the formal gardens in the rear of the mansion, drank the wine cellar dry, stole £900 sterling in coin, and carried off objects of value. Led by MacIntosh, the crowd worked with almost military precision to raze the building. "The Mob was so general," wrote the governor, "and so supported that all civil Power ceased in an Instant, and I had not the least authority to oppose or quiet the Mob."¹ The next day, tears in his eyes and bereft of his judicial robes, Hutchinson appeared in his courtroom, an anguished man who had been savagely discredited in the town he believed he had dutifully served for thirty years.

In pillaging the Boston mansions of Oliver and Hutchinson, and in storming the houses of William Story and Benjamin Hallowell, the crowd was demonstrating against the Stamp Act and the tightening of trade restrictions. But it was also expressing its anger at far more than parliamentary policy. Stamp distributors were intimidated and handled roughly in many other towns, but nowhere did the crowd destroy property on such a grand scale and with such exacting thoroughness.

The Boston disturbances demonstrate the fragile and shifting relationship among different elements in the popular party. James Otis commanded the columns of the *Boston Gazette* and Samuel Adams directed the Caucus. But who controlled the streets? The effigies of Oliver and others were prepared under the direction of some members of the Caucus who had formed themselves into the "Loyal Nine"—including Benjamin Edes, printer of the radical *Gazette*; John Avery and Thomas Chase, distillers; John Smith and Stephen Cleverly, braziers; and Thomas Crafts, a painter. These were established tradesmen who had long suffered from Boston's sunken economy. However, the marches themselves and most of the carefully planned dirty work on the houses of the wealthy had been left to the lower artisans, laborers, and mariners, while the more "respectable" members of the alliance melted into the night. The crowd, led by a poor shoemaker, demonstrated its deep hostility to elitist oppressors such as Hutchinson, who had given his opinion in the last war that a £5 bounty offered to the poor for enlisting was too generous.

Besides intimidating British officialdom and its colonial collaborators, which is probably all that its leaders intended, the crowd gave vent to years of resentment at the accumulation of wealth and power by the prerogative faction. Behind every swing of the ax and every hurled stone lay the fury of a Bostonian who had read or heard the repeated reference to impoverished people as "rabble" and to the Caucus as a "herd of fools, tools, and sycophants," and who had suffered economic hardship while others fattened their purses.² These activists had heard it said over and over that "Luxury and extravagance are . . . destructive of those virtues which are necessary for the preservation of liberty and the happiness of the people." They had burned inwardly at the assertion that poverty was the best inducement for industry and frugality and that "the common people of this town and country live too well."³ Now, in August 1765, they had some scores to settle. They had lost faith that opportunity or equitable relations any longer prevailed in their town. If they could not change this situation, they could at least administer their own kind of rough justice to those who judged them so harshly.

The political consciousness of the crowd and its use of the Stamp Act protests as an opportunity for an attack on wealth itself were remarked upon again and again in the aftermath of the August forays. The mob that had worked "with a rage scarce to be exemplified by the most savage people," wrote the governor, targeted fifteen additional houses in what was becoming "a War of Plunder, of general levelling and taking away the Distinction of rich and poor."⁴ On September 10, two weeks after the destruction of Hutchinson's house, a Boston merchant wrote that "the rich men in the town" were seized with apprehension and "were moveing their cash & valuable furniture, &c" to the homes of poorer friends who were above the resentment of the lower class. Another merchant confirmed that the "infernal Mob" was threatening "many of the most respectable Inhabitants with destruction to their Houses, Furnitur &c."⁵

Many of the Caucus leaders deplored the sacking of property on the night of August 26 while upholding the actions of August 14 as a legitimate defense of the people's rights. Violence in limited doses was all they were ready to prescribe. Intimidation of obnoxious officials, not class warfare, was what they wanted. The town meeting hurriedly expressed its "utter detestation" of the recent violence.⁶ But this was as far as the middle-class Caucus members and Whig merchants were prepared to go. Every effort by Hutchinson and the governor to indict

the mob leaders, who could easily have been identified, was frustrated. No one stepped forward to claim the £300 reward offered for information leading to the conviction of the riot leaders.

Seen in the context of three generations of social and economic change in Boston, the Stamp Act riots provide the most illuminating example of how the molten metal of group consciousness and feeling was smithied out in the course of defying authority and restoring the "moral economy." Members of the Boston "mob" needed no upper-class leaders to tell them that economic stagnation had been strangling their opportunities and otherwise affecting their lives. They had indeed acted in "a rage," as so many of the accounts expressed it, and their rage was directly linked to the conditions of their lives and to the connection they perceived between their plight and the exercise of power by the prerogative elite. The rituals of public humiliation carried out on the nights of August 14 and 26 marked the culmination of an era of mounting protest against oligarchic wealth and power. At the same time they were attacks on the symbols of wealth and ostentatious displays of wealth rather than frontal assaults on the economic and social order. In addition, the crowd actions demonstrated the fragility of the union between protesting city dwellers who occupied places in the lower strata of the laboring community and their more bourgeois partners, who in the uninhibited attacks on property saw their control melting away. It was Ebenezer MacIntosh who controlled the crowd, not Samuel Adams, James Otis, or any of the Loyal Nine.

This rapid emergence of MacIntosh was obvious to everyone in Boston. By the time Pope's Day arrived, less than ten weeks after the destruction of Hutchinson's house, the press was calling him "Commander of the South [End]" and was giving him coverage for effecting a "treaty" with his North End counterpart whereby a peaceful and united Pope's Day parade would replace the traditional bone-breaking brawl. It was no wonder that the elite began to refer to MacIntosh as "a Masaniello."⁷ Like the Neapolitan rebel of 1647, he had come from nowhere to take command of a force so powerful that it appeared nobody could stop it.

By mid-December MacIntosh's power had become even more apparent. Several weeks before, Andrew Oliver's commission as stamp distributor had arrived from England, and although Oliver had previously promised that he would give up his commission, Bostonians wanted an immediate and unequivocal renunciation. They also wanted his public humiliation. In the end, MacIntosh marched him across

town in pelting rain to the Liberty Tree in the South End, where the crowd watched Oliver eat humble pie as he sardonically declared that he would "always think myself very happy when it shall be in my power to serve this people."⁸ The drenched observers cheered and returned to their places of work. Having forced Oliver's resignation, the alliance of protesting merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, laborers, and mariners convinced the customs officers to open their doors for business, allowing the portbound fleet to embark, in defiance of an act of Parliament, with unstamped clearance papers.

Popular Resistance in New York

In New York and Philadelphia the growing resentment toward wealth and luxurious living, the rejection of an elitist conception of politics, the articulation of laboring-class interests, and the struggle for power within the emerging patriot movement also gained momentum in 1765. As in Boston, the extraordinary new vigor of urban laboring people in defining and pursuing their goals raised the specter of a radicalized form of politics and a radically changed society in the minds of many middle- and upper-class city dwellers. Many of the initial leaders of the resistance movement against England would later abandon it out of their fear of social disorder.

In New York, where the postwar depression wreaked havoc among the hundreds of shipbuilders and mariners who had been essential to the town's impressive maritime advance during the war, resistance to the Stamp Act began later than in Boston but followed a similar pattern. By late August sentiment among the lower ranks, especially maritime workers, had coalesced sufficiently to convince stamp distributor James McEvers, a wealthy merchant, to resign his post, fearing that "my House would have been Pillag'd, my Person Abused and His Majestys Revenue Impair'd."⁹ A month later, when the English ship carrying the stamps for New York arrived, several thousand New Yorkers swarmed to the shoreline to prevent them from being landed. On October 24, after a military regiment brought the stamps ashore in the dead of night and took them to Fort George, handwritten placards appeared throughout the town warning that "the first Man that either distributes or makes use of Stamp Paper let him take Care of his House, Person, and Effects. We dare. VOX POPULI."¹⁰

November 1 was the date when the Stamp Act went into force. Thereafter no ship could leave a colonial harbor without customs clear-



5. *Plan of New York in 1767 by Bernard Ratzer*

ance documents to which the hated stamps had been properly affixed. As the fateful day approached, tension mounted. On October 31 the town's merchants met at Burns's City Tavern and agreed not to import any English goods while the Stamp Act was in effect. Simultaneously artisans, mariners, and laborers met on the common and displayed their collective strength by marching down Broadway to Fort George and back in the most impressive show of lower-class power since the days of Jacob Leisler. Badly split in the election of 1761, they were now showing strong signs of solidarity. The response of seventy-seven-year-old Governor Cadwallader Colden was an order to strengthen the fortifications at Fort George in preparation for a showdown with the mob.

If action was what Colden craved, he did not have long to wait. On the night of October 31 the crowd assembled and soon was roaring through the streets, threatening the homes of those suspected of sympathizing with British policy. "Some thousands of windows Broke," wrote one British officer who watched the scene. But this was only a warm-up for the next night. On November 1 a huge crowd assembled and agreed to deliver a strident message to the governor, calling him "the Chief Murderer of their Rights and Privileges" and warning that "you'll die a Martyr to your own Villainy, and be Hang'd like Porteis, upon a Signpost, as a Memento to all wicked Governors, and that every Man, that assists you, Shall be, surely, put to Death."¹¹

At nightfall the street theater began. Some two thousand New Yorkers marched by candlelight to Fort George, where they strung up effigies of the devil and Governor Colden. After figuratively hanging the governor, the crowd cut down the effigy, carried it to his mansion, liberated his prize chariot, and with "the grossest ribaldry" paraded the effigy around the town in the coach.¹² The high point of the celebration came when the shouting crowd hurled the governor's coach and two sleighs into a bonfire and hoisted Colden's effigy atop the flaming heap.

Warming to their task, the people then surged through the streets to the house of Major Thomas James, commander of the sixtieth Regiment of royal artillery at Fort George. Hated for his outspoken defense of the Stamp Act and his promise that "the stamps would be crammed down New Yorkers' throats," James now felt the power of the crowd, which gutted his house and destroyed its furnishings.¹³ Not until four in the morning did the throng retire.

Four days later the crowd regathered, this time to demand the sur-

render of the stamps that were housed at Fort George. Several thousand people marched to the walls of the fort, taunting the guards to fire and hurling insults liberally interspersed with bricks, stones, and garbage. The troops held their fire, and Colden, withdrawing from the brink, agreed to surrender the stamps to the city officials. A few days later, with five thousand people lining the streets, the stamps were hauled in carts to the city hall and handed over to the mayor and aldermen.

In New York no Masaniello arose from the anonymous masses to lead the crowd as in Boston. Leadership was more fragmented, resting mostly in the hands of a group of popular tradesmen and privateering captains who had risen from obscurity to small-trader status during the Seven Years' War. They included several ship carpenters, instrumentmaker John Lamb, upholsterer Marinus Willett, ship captains Isaac Sears and Alexander McDougall, and schoolteacher Hugh Hughes. Styling themselves the "Sons of Liberty," they maneuvered for control of men in the lower ranks. Also contending for the allegiance of the laboring people were Whig merchants and lawyers William Smith, Jr., John Morin Scott, and William Livingston, the anti-DeLancey triumvirate that had worked hard in the elections of 1761 to gain the artisans' support. After the "General Terror of November 1-4" the lawyers, closely tied to the city's Whig merchants, secured the backing of McDougall and then "went around to every part of the town," attempting to enlist the support of other sea captains and their lower-class followers.¹⁴ They knew they could not do so without the support of those below them, but they were also coming to fear the awful power of the assembled artisans and their maritime compatriots.

The tension between upper-class Whigs and laboring-class radicals increased throughout the remainder of 1765. Even though the stamp distributor resigned his post, the law went into effect on November 1. Thereafter any ship leaving port without stamped documents defied the king and Parliament. The alternatives for the American seaport dwellers were to maintain an embargo until British policy changed or to ship in defiance of the law. New Yorkers met on November 26 to decide on instructions to the city's representatives to the assembly, which was debating the issue. Such an open-air referendum was itself a radical innovation in New York, for it invited all the people to debate publicly and to reach a decision on a momentous issue in a town meeting format that had been known previously only in Boston. The

outcome, however, was less than radical, for the Livingston Whigs, preferring passive resistance through embargo to active defiance of English law, gained control of the popular meeting and pushed through their embargo resolution.

Thwarted at this meeting, the radicals found other ways to gain their objective. They exerted pressure on the customs officials, who opened the port and cleared ships without stamped papers. "This step," wrote the latter, "we thought more advisable as we understood the Mob (which are daily increasing and gathering strength, from the arrival of Seamen, and none going out, and who are the people that are most dangerous on these occasions, as their whole dependance for a subsistence is upon Trade) were soon to have a meeting."¹⁵ As in Boston, the lower ranks were feeling their power and beginning to take independent action.

In two significant ways, however, the New York radicals differed from their Boston counterparts. First, New York had prospered during the Seven Years' War whereas Boston had languished, and leaders such as Lamb, Sears, and McDougall, who were sons of artisans, had risen into the middle class whereas men such as Ebenezer MacIntosh had not. Thus the voices raised against the wealthy were more muted in New York than in the capital of Massachusetts. Second, in Boston the radicals were wont to invoke the old Puritan ideals of community and to deplore the pursuit of private interest. New Yorkers, legatees of a far more utilitarian, less religiously oriented culture and part of an urban society in which entrepreneurship had been legitimated by the successes of the Seven Years' War, looked self-interest in the eye and made no apologies for it. "*Self Interest* is the grand Principle of all Human Actions," declared John Holt's radical *New-York Gazette*; "it is unreasonable and vain to expect Service from a Man who must act contrary to his own Interests to perform it . . . The publick Happiness is then in the most perfect State, when each Individual acts the most agreeably to his own Interest."¹⁶ Here was an argument that could be aptly employed in the resistance to oppressive English policies. As "Freeman" observed, both the colonies and the mother country had interests that were legitimate to pursue, and if "the benefit of one must necessarily be in the same degree hurtful to the others, then these two Interests can never unite in the same government; their connection should be broken off, the jarring interest should be removed, or new modelled into Harmony & confidence with the Rest."¹⁷ Thus "the

radicals reduced reason to a mere calculation of personal interest," a formulation that would have drawn immediate howls from the likes of Samuel Adams or James Otis in Boston.¹⁸

Political Alignments in Philadelphia

Philadelphia's reaction to the Stamp Act contrasted starkly with those of Boston and New York. Stamps were no less hated in Pennsylvania's capital, but the city remained singularly free of the ritual processions, effigy burnings, and property destruction that characterized the other port towns. Philadelphia's stamp distributor was John Hughes, a baker turned merchant, one of Franklin's oldest friends, a brother of New York radical Hugh Hughes, and, until 1765, a stalwart of the popular assembly party.

By September 1765, Hughes was one of the least popular men in Philadelphia and the proprietary party was charging that his patron, Franklin, had actually helped write the Stamp Act in London. On the evening of September 16, when news arrived that George Grenville, one of the authors of the Stamp Act, had resigned as chief minister, a celebrating crowd assembled at the London Coffee House, owned by Presbyterian William Bradford, printer of the *Pennsylvania Journal* and a member of the newly formed Philadelphia Sons of Liberty. Toasts to Grenville's ill health turned to cries that the houses of Franklin, Galloway, Hughes, and others involved in supporting the Stamp Act "should be level'd with the Street."¹⁹ It appeared that the angry crowd might emulate their Boston brethren until Joseph Galloway marshaled about eight hundred men, whom he had organized into an Association for the Preservation of the Peace. The Association was really a private army of Franklin's artisan supporters, and on cue they took their places in front of the threatened houses.

Now artisan faced artisan. The anti-Stamp Act crowd, according to Hughes, was made up of "the lower class," whipped up by "Presbyterians and proprietary Emissaries" led by Chief Justice William Allen's son; the Franklin-Galloway stalwarts were made up of two groups of ship carpenters, the White Oaks and the Hearts of Oak, as well as many other "hones(t) good tradesmen," as Franklin's wife described them.²⁰ These mechanics had no love for the Stamp Act, but they had stood with Franklin for years. They hoped the rumors about his complicity in the Stamp Act were simply part of the proprietary

mudslinging campaign; in the meantime they intended to defend the property and families of Franklin and his friends.

In Boston master artisans and petty entrepreneurs had organized powerfully in the Sons of Liberty, and lower artisans and laborers of the South and North Ends had submerged their rivalry and united behind a poor shoemaker. In Philadelphia, the royal government issue had deeply divided the working people, permitting upper-class leaders to retain control of both parts of the laboring populations. Face to face with Franklin's artisan friends, the anti-Stamp Act crowd could only burn "a Figure that they call'd a Stamp-man" and then melt away into the night.²¹

Two weeks later Philadelphians went to the polls for an election even more tumultuous than the one in 1764. For months Galloway and other assembly leaders had been working to reverse the defeats of the previous year. To recapture the allegiance of the Germans, they paid naturalization fees, settled tavern bills, courted German leaders, and added a German merchant to the assembly party slate. The unpopular Hughes was purged from the ticket and one proprietary winner from 1764 was induced to switch to the assembly party. The proprietary party struggled to maintain its edge. Its leaders convinced Governor John Penn to appoint dozens of Presbyterian justices of the peace and to issue charters of incorporation to German churches, a reversal of a long-maintained proprietary policy. The leaders also worked hard on the Scots-Irish and German working men. The city's presses again worked overtime to turn out campaign literature.

The polls remained open for three days as nearly 2,000 voters, or about 80 percent of the eligible males, cast ballots. When the votes were counted, the assembly party rejoiced to find that they had recouped most of their losses from the previous year. The deep division of laboring men was stunningly recorded in the vote for the city's two burgesses. Thomas Willing, a middle-of-the-road merchant, ran on both tickets, but the other place was hotly contested by James Pemberton, a venerable Quaker brought out of retirement by the Franklin-Galloway party, and George Bryan, the Presbyterian merchant who had defeated Franklin in 1764. Pemberton and Bryan each polled 902 votes, forcing a runoff election won by Pemberton later in October. No other port had such an electoral turnout during the revolutionary era, and never again would laboring-class voters be so divided.

On two occasions after the election, the anti-Stamp Act crowd tried to force Hughes to resign as stamp distributor. Both times the artisan

supporters of the Franklin party formed a cordon around Hughes's house, but they extracted from him, as the price of protection, a promise not to execute the Stamp Act "until the King's further pleasure was known, or until the act should be put into execution in the neighbouring provinces."²²

The issue of royal government in Pennsylvania was so emotional that it diverted attention from the more fundamental issues of economic stagnation and British imperial policies, distorted the ideological positions of the proprietary and assembly parties, and divided those who in terms of economic interest had a natural affinity for each other. The assembly party, known for many decades for its defense of popular rights, continued misguidedly to seek royal government, which alone could shear the hated Thomas Penn of his proprietorship. Accordingly the popular party attempted to mute opposition to the Stamp Act. No less did the proprietary party reverse its traditional role. It wooed the Presbyterian Scots-Irish and the Lutheran and Reformed Germans by opposing the Stamp Act. This was so uncharacteristic a role that even the more liberal proprietary party members squirmed. But, after all, how often did their old enemy Franklin blunder so monumentally?

Unnatural alliances can last only so long and politicians cannot act out of character forever. Once the quest for royal government was recognized as a phantom goal, Philadelphia's occupational and religious groups began to realign. Even during the Stamp Act protests, a re-knitting of the laboring classes began. By early November, lower-class pressure forced Philadelphia's merchants to stop importing English goods until the Stamp Act was repealed. One of Philadelphia's wealthiest merchants believed his house would be gutted if he conformed to the Stamp Act, and another anticipated "a deluge of blood" if merchants evaded the boycott of imported goods.²³

Outgoing trade along coastal routes and to the Caribbean was a different matter. To shut it off would idle a large part of the maritime laboring force and the tradesmen connected to it. Therefore, as in the other ports, popular pressure was strong to clear outgoing ships without stamped papers. As in New York, the clamor of the seamen, along with pressure from some merchants, soon compelled port officials to issue such clearances.

By the summer of 1766 the alliance of proprietary Anglicans and their Presbyterian supporters had cracked wide open. Presbyterians became convinced that the Anglicans were set upon establishing an American bishopric that would make life difficult for all dissenting

groups; Anglicans became increasingly uncomfortable opposing policies devised in England; the disappearance of the royal government issue detached the Germans and Scots-Irish from their confederation with the proprietary party; and Quakers began to split between those who favored a conciliatory approach to the Anglo-American tension and those who counseled active opposition. Out of the kaleidoscopic shifting of groups a wholly new force was about to make its appearance in city politics—a Presbyterian-led, artisan-based radical Whig party that would more closely resemble the popular parties in Boston and New York.

The Aftereffects of the Stamp Act

In December 1765 all the northern seaports reopened for trade. Their doughty citizens could rejoice at having successfully resisted English authority, even though formal repeal of the Stamp Act did not come until the following year. But among the upper-class merchants and lawyers who had attempted to lead the resistance movement, the taste of victory was soured by the knowledge that in several instances the protest movement had slipped beyond their control. In working to counteract what they saw as a punitive British imperial policy, the Whig leadership of the port towns had welcomed the *vox populi* and the assembled force of the crowds. In fact they could not do without them. But once the genie was out of the bottle, how could it be imprisoned again?

The "mob," of course, has been feared throughout history by both upper-class holders of power and intellectuals on the assumption that the masses are irrational, are stirred into violent paroxysms by irresponsible rabble-rousers, and are indiscriminate in selecting their targets. Once unloosed, the mob is capable of almost anything. Hence eighteenth-century writers, including many Whigs, referred to the assembled commonalty over and over again as "the unthinking multitude," the "hellish crew," the "impassioned dregs of society," and the like. William Douglass was convinced that the Land Bank leaders in Boston in 1740 had succeeded in "debauching" the minds of unthinking people, "instilling into them some pernicious Principles, destructive of all Society, and good Government," particularly "that *common Consent*, or the Humour of the Multitude, ought to be the *Ratio Ultima* in every Thing."²⁴ Peter Oliver, brother of the Boston stamp distributor, believed that the crowd in his city, like all mobs, was a "perfect

Machine, wound up by any Hand who might first take the Winch."²⁵

The seaport crowds of 1765 can best be understood, however, as large groups of disaffected citizens, drawn heavily but not entirely from the laboring ranks, who worked in purposeful and coordinated ways to protest British policies and express opposition to local oligarchies. Leadership of the crowds varied from port to port. In Boston, where poverty was endemic and where the Pope's Day tradition and recurrent street demonstrations since the late 1730s had taught the laboring classes the basic lessons of organization and protest, the crowd leaders emerged from the lower social ranks and were tenuously tied to those above them. In New York, where poverty had arrived only in the wake of the Seven Years' War and there was no recent history of crowd protests, the Stamp Act demonstrators were led by men somewhat higher up the social ladder—ship captains, master craftsmen, and even lawyers. In Philadelphia, where prosperity had also inhibited the development of class consciousness before 1760 and where local political issues divided artisans and shopkeepers, upper-class representatives such as Joseph Galloway and James Allen led the people.

Despite these differences, in all three towns the struggle for political control was in a highly fluid state. Thomas Hutchinson believed that in Boston a tight chain of command linked the upper, middle, and lower ranks. It began, he said, with members of the Merchants Committee; descended to the master craftsmen, who were organized through the Loyal Nine, several branches of the Caucus, and the fire companies; and finally tapped the laborers, mariners, servants, and even slaves. Hutchinson was half right, correctly identifying the social layering in Boston and describing how Whig merchant leaders wished their political system to operate. But he overestimated the ability of the merchants and lawyers to control the crowd because he underestimated the self-energizing capabilities of common people. "The Boston Mob," wrote one observer, "raised first by the Instigation of Many of the Principal Inhabitants, Allured by Plunder, rose shortly after of their own Accord."²⁶

In New York it was much the same. General Thomas Gage believed that "people of Property" had raised "the lower Class to prevent the Execution of the [Stamp] Law." The inferior people would not have stirred, Gage asserted, except that "very great Pains were taken to rouse them," especially the sailors, who "are entirely at the Command of the Merchants who employ them."²⁷ Gage exaggerated the power of the merchants but soon altered his vision of the lower class as so much

water to be pumped from a well by the propertied elite. After five days of tumult in New York, the "people of property," he wrote, "having no more influence over them [the crowd], began to be filled with terrors for their own Safety."²⁸

Both prerogative men and Whig leaders underestimated the self-activating capacity of the crowd. But by the end of 1765, a year of extraordinary significance in the social history of the port towns, the scales had been lifted from upper-class eyes. The momentous question at the end of that year, as the resistance movement against England began to lay bare signs of great internal stress, was this: If the "mob" controlled the streets, who would control the "mob"? The Whig leaders "began to be terrified at the Spirit they had raised," warned Gage, "to perceive that popular Fury was not to be guided, and each Individual feared he might be the next Victim to their Rapacity."²⁹ That, it was clear to men accustomed to political power and the obeisance of those beneath them, must not happen.

The Onset of Revolution

Chapter 7

THE YEAR 1765 had been the most explosive in the history of the seaport towns. Urban dwellers deeply resented and violently opposed new British policies. Local political factionalism produced bitter campaigns at the polls. Obscure men assumed leadership roles among the mass of ordinary people, upper-class Whiggish leaders maneuvered to maintain control of popular politics, and prerogative men shuddered at the outburst of leveling sentiments. The reopening of the northern ports at the end of the year revived commerce, and news that the Stamp Act had been repealed in May 1766 gave hope that the dispute with the mother country might be laid to rest. But optimism was short-lived, for the English crown swiftly signaled that it had no intention of permitting the Americans to go their own way. Parliament passed new legislation in 1767 designed to bring the colonies to heel. The Townshend Acts levied duties on paper, lead, painters' colors, and tea. They also sent a board of determined customs commissioners to the colonies to enforce trade restrictions and suspended New York's assembly until that body adhered to the Quartering Act of 1765 by providing properly for British troops who had been garrisoned in the colony since the end of the Seven Years' War. From this moment on, the colonies and the parent country proceeded toward revolution.

The colonists did not become revolutionaries lightly. They engaged in a full decade of debate and internal struggle before deciding to break the chains of dependence and to fight for separation. In this evolving revolutionary impulse in the northern ports, ideological principles and economic interests were intimately conjoined. Everyone, with the possible exception of a handful of ascetic recluses, has economic interests; and everyone, including the least educated members of the community, has an ideology. Ebenezer MacIntosh, the debt-ridden street commander of the Boston crowd in 1765, knew how to measure the price

of bread and the cost of imported English cloth against the wages he could earn at the cobbler's bench, just as Thomas Hutchinson, the wealthy merchant and government official, understood how the sterling exchange rate affected his margin of profit.

Like so many of New England's laboring poor, MacIntosh was fervently antipapist and only slightly less anti-Anglican. He was also convinced that affluence and self-indulgence had corrupted Boston's elite. He baptized his firstborn son Pascale Paoli MacIntosh, and in this commemoration of the humble Corsican patriot can be seen the cast of his values. Hutchinson named no children after English aristocrats but embraced his own ideology no less warmly. Traditional English rights, including religious freedom, balanced government, limits on executive authority, and an electorate of substantial property-holders, formed the foundation of his thought. With lesser men keeping to their places and deferring to the judgments of their betters, social order would be maintained.

Many others have explored in fine detail the step-by-step alienation from England and the final call to arms. The concern here is the internal struggle for a new social order that accompanied the severing of ties with England and was centered in events in the three port towns.

The crucial decade after 1765 produced the most violent economic fluctuations and the most difficult circumstances that people of all ranks in the port towns had ever known. Two silent streams of unplanned change—the effect of English policies on local economies and the cumulative effect of long-range changes that were largely unrelated to decisions hammered out in London—exerted a major influence on urban dwellers' reactions to the policies of the English government after 1765.

Economic Change and New Commercial Policies

Among the alterations in the northern seaport towns in the last decade of the colonial era, none was more noticeable than sheer physical expansion. Philadelphia spurted ahead spectacularly—from about 18,000 in 1765 to nearly 25,000 a decade later. New York had reached 22,000 by 1771 and perhaps a few thousand more by the time of the Revolution. Only Boston failed to share in the rapid urban development, but it did end thirty years of demographic stagnation by adding perhaps a thousand persons to its population, thus returning to the size it had been in the early 1740s.

One immediate advantage of population growth was the spurring of the building trades. Work for construction artisans was sporadic at best in Boston; in the decade after 1765 the number of houses increased by only about twenty per year. But in New York and Philadelphia construction boomed. The Manhattan port added about a thousand houses from 1765 to 1776 and Philadelphia more than twice that number. In 1774 roof beams were raised for more houses in Pennsylvania's capital than in Boston during the entire prerevolutionary decade. Expansion of this magnitude also created a need for more churches and public buildings. While Boston's craftsmen erected only one major public building in the final decade of the colonial period, their counterparts in Philadelphia were building the "New College" for the emerging University of Pennsylvania, Carpenters Hall, new churches for the Anglicans, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, and the two largest structures erected in colonial America, the Bettering House and the Walnut Street Prison.

The success of these Philadelphia construction tradesmen relative to their Boston cousins is systematically recorded in their inventories of estate. Among seventeen construction artisans whose estates were inventoried in Boston from 1766 to 1775 the median personal wealth left at death was £60 sterling; in Philadelphia, among nineteen artisans, it was £198.

While Boston's construction artisans scrambled for work in the 1760s and 1770s, the fortunes of shipbuilding craftsmen brightened slightly from the dismal days of the 1750s. Philadelphia, however, surpassed its New England rival in ship construction by the eve of the Revolution. Meanwhile, ship construction in New York fell badly.

Boston's problems were also compounded by the loss of much of its fishing industry to outlying ports and by the reduced amount of tonnage, relative to New York and Philadelphia, entering and clearing its harbor. By the 1760s New York had gained on Boston, and Philadelphia had surpassed it.

Despite its eclipse as North America's premier entrepôt, Boston staged a commercial recovery in the late 1760s and early 1770s. Tonnage clearing the harbor rose almost 40 percent in the last decade of the colonial period from the previous fifteen years, and this trend must have brought regular employment to most of the town's large maritime labor force. Yet Boston could not halt its decline relative to Philadelphia and New York, for the latter two ports, especially Philadelphia, were the shipping points for prospering agricultural hinterlands that ex-

panded rapidly after the Peace of Paris. Boston remained the commercial center for a relatively unproductive interior whose excess population, unable to extract a living from the thin New England soils, drifted off to the forests and rocky coastline of New Hampshire and Maine. By the end of the colonial period the people of Massachusetts could not even feed themselves. From 1768 to 1772 the Bay colony was a large net importer of bread and flour, wheat, corn, beef, and pork. About 14 percent of its basic foodstuff requirements had to be purchased from other colonies.

New York and Philadelphia, on the other hand, were becoming the breadbaskets not only for colonies to the north but also for England and southern Europe, where crippling droughts created an unprecedented demand for grains from the Middle Atlantic region from 1764 onward. New York was able to export almost 30 percent of its own food requirements from 1768 to 1772, and Pennsylvania more than half.

For merchants and large shopkeepers, the most troubling problem of the prerevolutionary decade was the growing domination of the American commercial process by English decision makers and English capital. To be sure, the colonial economy had always been the servant of the metropolitan master; that was what it meant to be a colony, to be an exporter of foodstuffs and raw products and an importer of finished goods. Nobody expected or even desired economic sovereignty. But as the colonial economies matured, restrictions on local development began to grate. In the wake of the Seven Years' War, when those restrictions multiplied rapidly, the situation seemed less and less tolerable.

Among the developments that northern merchants found worrisome was British merchants' increasing tendency to sell directly to shopkeepers or to organize auctions for selling English goods directly to the public. These "vendue sales," which had customarily been reserved for the disposal of damaged goods, became an ever larger part of commercial life in the northern ports. But cutting out the colonial middleman, this method of dumping goods on the American market struck directly at the interests of the seaboard merchant and shopkeeper. Vendue sales, complained one Philadelphian in 1772 "have gone near to deprive many an honest Family of a Living."¹ The Tea Act, passed by Parliament the following year, aroused bitter opposition because it represented further intervention in the American marketing process. The act offered urban consumers a lower price by allowing the East

India Company to sell its product directly to the American public through its agents in the colonies. The angry reaction of most northern merchants stemmed not only from the fact that many of them had trafficked profitably in smuggled Dutch tea, which was now to be undersold, but also from the fact that they viewed the Tea Act as an invidious plan to wrest control of the internal workings of the American economy from the hands of its own people.

A second commercial difficulty was British policymakers' increasingly heavy restriction of the colonial currency system. The Currency Act of 1764 strictly limited the authority of Pennsylvania and New York to issue paper currency. In the northern port towns, especially New York and Philadelphia, the hard money drain was a fact of life, for shipping gold and silver to the mother country was the only way to make up for an excess of imports over exports. Locally issued paper money provided the circulating medium of local trade. When it was disallowed, internal trade withered, hurting merchant and artisan alike and obliging traders to concoct ingenious schemes for issuing fiat money that might gain legislative approval and escape royal notice.

Another aspect of the monetary problem was the erratic flow of British credit after the Seven Years' War. Eyeing the dynamic growth of the colonial population, English and Scottish merchants at first vastly increased credit sales to American importers in order to spur the consumption of British goods. American merchants willingly increased their orders and passed their indebtedness on to retailers and consumers as book credit, where it became, in effect, a part of the colonial supply of money. Accepting credit in order to expand was not in itself a disadvantageous policy, but it made borrowers far more vulnerable to cyclical swings in the British credit structure. Hence, during the English financial crisis of 1762 and 1772, when sharp business contractions obliged British lenders to call in their colonial debts, many seaboard merchants were unable to meet the demands of their overseas creditors and went bankrupt.

The credit crisis of 1772 was especially severe. The bankruptcy rate doubled and panic swept both sides of the Atlantic, causing a "marked deterioration" of "debtor-creditor relations between the thirteen colonies and the mother country."² The scramble for liquidity was greatest among the southern planters, whose level of indebtedness was the highest in the colonies. But the northern commercial centers were also hard hit. Many merchants found themselves pinched. Haled into court for settlement of accounts and committed to debtors' prison when they

could not pay, they began to lose faith in the violently cyclical behavior of the Anglo-American commercial system.

In their quarrel with England the merchants were also concerned about constitutional and natural rights. In fact they made no distinction between England's onerous new economic regulation and its encroachment on the political rights of American subjects. They saw a coordinated attack on their "lives, liberties, and property," as they so frequently phrased it. Their economic interests and ideological principles were so closely interwoven as to be virtually inseparable.

Economic life after 1765 was not always determined in the same ways for the laboring classes as for merchants and shopkeepers, although there was often coincidence of interests. The sudden contraction of a merchant's credit brought demands upon artisans to settle accounts. If work had been slow, a laboring man in debt could find himself in court or even in debtors' prison, where his earning power was brought to a dead halt. But vendue sales, hated by many merchants, ensured the availability of cheaper imported goods. Trade doldrums hurt merchants, artisans, and mariners, but they also tended to drive land values and house rents down, thus easing budgetary pressures on laboring people who rented rooms or houses.

The economic volatility of the late colonial period accentuated the uncertainty of the preindustrial craftsman's work rhythms. When the postwar commercial depression bottomed out early in 1765, hopes revived for better times. But within a year substantial unemployment was reported in all the port towns. The Philadelphia grand jury lamented early in 1766 that many of "the labouring People, and others in low circumstances . . . who are willing to work, cannot obtain sufficient Employment to support themselves and their Families."³ Reports of unemployment continued in 1767 and 1768, and by the end of 1768 forced sales of property reached an all-time high. The nadir came in 1769, when New York property values declined by one-half or more and the city's prison bulged with insolvent debtors. Unemployment was still widespread in early 1770, when the employment of moonlighting British troops at cut-rate wages brought a storm of protest from the artisan class. In the same year a friend of Governor Hutchinson found many of Boston's laboring people "almost starving for want of Employment" and believed that in their desperation they would soon be "going to plunder the Rich and then cutting their throats."⁴

Commercial revival came later in 1770. But in 1772 the contraction

of British credit was felt from the top to the bottom of the social scale. Shops failed, unemployment spread again, and the jails filled to overflowing with formerly respectable citizens who could not pay their debts.

Another sign of economic difficulties was the rapid abandonment of bound labor in favor of free labor during the last two decades of the colonial era. In uncertain times, those who still possessed the resources to command the labor of others learned that they were better off hiring labor when they needed it while remaining free of the obligation to maintain unremunerative workers during dull periods.

The importation of slaves dropped sharply at the end of the Seven Years' War in all three northern towns. By 1768 importations had virtually ceased in Philadelphia and Boston, and the town meeting in the latter city was instructing its representatives to advocate total abolition of the slave trade. In Philadelphia the number of slaves fell by almost half from 1767 to 1775, and the proportion of unfree laboring males dropped from about 60 to 35 percent. In New York, where slaves had constituted about 20 percent of the population in the 1730s and 1740s, they made up only 14 percent by 1771. In Boston the number of slaves dropped from 1,544 in 1752 to 811 in 1765 and probably fell below 500 by the outbreak of the war. Immigrating indentured servants entered the city at a trickle. On the eve of the Revolution bound laborers made up no more than 15 percent of those who worked with their hands.

While employers phased out bound labor, artisans also helped to usher in a new labor system. As times grew hard, their resentment of slave-labor competition increased. It is no coincidence that the strongest attacks on slavery in the prerevolutionary decade, excluding those by Quakers, who had made abolition a central part of their reformist zeal since the 1550s, were those by artisan spokesmen such as James Otis and Nathaniel Appleton in Boston and Benjamin Rush and Thomas Paine in Philadelphia. Self-interest also motivated those slave owners who freed their aged or infirm slaves who could no longer work, thus saving the shilling per day that it cost to feed them. This forced freedom became extensive enough in New York that in 1773 the legislature passed a law imposing a £20 fine on the last owner of a freedman beggar—a measure taken more to keep the relief rolls down than to guarantee humane treatment for worn-out slaves. Paternalistic relations between employer and worker, either black or white, were giving way to a system in which cooler calculations of supply and demand governed

the labor market and wage rates were determined not by custom but by market conditions.

Boycotts of British goods also affected the availability of work in the port towns. Three times—in 1765–66, 1767–70, and 1774–75—the three northern ports attempted to collaborate in pledging not to consume or import British goods until their grievances were redressed. This tri-city cooperation was never perfected, but all the ports, for greater or lesser periods, curbed imports from England. These boycotts hampered a number of artisans who relied on imported materials such as glass, glue, and certain metals but gave prospects for fuller employment to a far larger number of craftsmen whose domestic handicrafts were stimulated when English goods were banned. The “buy American” campaigns, which were initially designed to force repeal of odious English legislation, thus moved far beyond their original purpose. They became remedies for unemployment, raised embryonic visions of economic nationalism, and spread the idea that artisans, through forging political pressure groups, could influence public policy in ways that increased their earning power.

During these years, as the dispute with England became more acrimonious, prices made their final cyclical swing. In Philadelphia food costs began to drop in 1765 and reached a low point in 1769. Then they began a climactic five-year climb that increased the cost of food by nearly 25 percent from 1769 to 1774. The managers of Philadelphia's Bettering House complained in 1775 that they were paying twice as much for food items as they had in previous years. New York prices followed a similar trend: a modest decline in the mid-1760s, followed by another punishing upswing early in the 1770s.

To make matters worse, the period of highest prices nearly coincided with the second major commercial downturn, which began in 1772 after the sudden contraction of British credit reverberated all along the seaboard. As in the deep slump from 1760 to 1764, the recession came just when food costs for laboring families were rising sharply. There was no general *crise de subsistance*, but the situation was serious enough for the Philadelphia overseers of the poor to distribute thousands of loaves of bread.

The cost of other items in the household budget—firewood, rent, and clothing—remained fairly stable during the ten years before the Revolution, and after 1767 New York's share of debt from the Seven Years' War was retired. But in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania the huge war debt had to be retired by land taxes scheduled into the 1770s,

and local taxes continued to increase to keep up with climbing poor-relief expenses.

As in the depression of the early 1760s, wage rates often failed to keep pace with price hikes and in fact fell among the least skilled laborers. Philadelphia's mariners, whose wages during the Seven Years' War had risen to an all-time high of £4 and even £5 per month, saw their pay drop to traditional levels of £3 to £3.5 per month by 1763. Henceforth, the high level of immigration, which ensured a plentiful supply of seagoing men, kept wages at this level. Boston's mariners toiled for similar wages, and New York's mariners, who had commanded 6 shillings a day in 1759, also returned to the traditional £2 to £3 per month, a 50 percent decrease from the wartime heyday. Laborers fared no better. The wartime boom had lifted their daily wage to 4 shillings and occasionally a bit higher. But amid rising unemployment, wages fell in the mid-1760s. By 1769 laborers averaged barely 3 shillings per day in Philadelphia; in the early 1770s they earned even less. With new immigrants arriving almost weekly and many idle hands available, employers had no difficulty finding workers at these rates. The earning power of Philadelphia's dock workers, chimney sweeps, watchmen, woodcutters, well diggers, street scavengers, porters, and the like fell a full 30 percent between the height of the Seven Years' War and the outbreak of the Revolution.

In the face of severe budgetary pressures it is not surprising that seaport dwellers embarked on the most intense organizing in their history. Those who were able to organize and present a united front were best able to obtain higher wages. Philadelphia's ship captains, for example, who were closely tied to merchant shipowners, were able to protect the £7 (local currency) per month wage they had achieved during the Seven Years' War throughout the remainder of the colonial period. Operating from strength, they organized the Society for the Relief of Poor and Distressed Masters of Ships in 1765. Presumably a "friendly society" with charitable and fraternal purposes, the society, like its New England predecessor, the Marine Society of Boston, seems to have played an important role in maintaining the £7 per month wage.

Carpenters were also able to organize effectively. Philadelphia's master carpenters had been organized since the 1720s, but in the difficult 1760s its journeymen carpenters, who most frequently hired out to master craftsmen, established their own company and attempted to set rates that would allow them a decent living. New York's carpenters

organized in 1767 and Boston's some time before 1750. Philadelphia's ship carpenters were also organized effectively, and the political unity they displayed in 1765 in protecting the houses of Franklin and Hughes was probably matched by comparable solidarity on economic questions. In the years just before the Revolution, organized artisans were able to obtain a measure of wage security.

Men who worked in the least skilled occupations—mariners, laborers, cordwainers, tailors, and coopers—had far less success than those higher in the occupational hierarchy. This trend inexorably drove a wedge in the laboring classes, separating struggling lower artisans, who suffered greatly in the 1760s and 1770s, from upper artisans, who were able to maintain a degree of economic security and in some cases even to forge ahead.

Growing Poverty and Whig Remedies

In studying the momentous events that carried Americans into the Revolution, historians have understandably concentrated on the dramatic events of the decade after the Stamp Act riots: New York's resistance to the Quartering Act of 1765, the Townshend Acts of 1767 and the nonimportation movement that followed them, the occupation of Boston by British troops in 1768, the Boston Massacre of 1770, the Tea Act of 1773 and the subsequent Tea Party, the Intolerable Acts of 1774, the convening of the Continental Congress late in that year, and, finally, the outbreak of armed hostility at Lexington and Concord in the spring of 1775. These were the central events in the unfolding drama. But giving them impetus were social processes that themselves provided the origins of the American Revolution.

One important social change was the impoverishment of large segments of the urban populations. By and large, those who reluctantly went to the almshouses or gratefully accepted out-relief from overseers of the poor were not actively involved in the radical movement. Many of them, including widows, children, the sick and elderly, were politically inert. The active segment was composed of the wage-earning laborers and mariners in the lower echelon and of the artisans, small shopkeepers, and struggling professionals who joined the Sons of Liberty, threw tea into Boston harbor, and enforced the nonimportation agreements. The impoverishment of the lower quarter or third of society was important to these middling men, however, because the spread of poverty in the lowest laboring ranks, not simply among the

aged and infirm, signaled sickness in the body economic as surely as corruption betokened putridness in the body politic.

Local leaders had to face economic malaise at the same time that they had to confront English threats to American liberties. Hence, while Samuel Adams was dispensing impassioned rhetoric about British tyranny and the erosion of the rights of freeborn English subjects in Boston, overseers of the poor Samuel Whitwell and Samuel Abbot were dispensing out-relief to 15 percent of the householders in their wards and sending others to the workhouse or almshouse. New Yorkers learned about the Tea Act in 1773 at the same time that their newspapers were reporting a wave of thefts and shop burglaries and were noting that 425 souls were jostling for space in the overcrowded almshouse while hundreds of others lived on out-relief. In other words, in urban locales the entire discussion of American constitutional rights was carried out in the context of nagging poverty at the bottom of society and the crumbling of economic security in the middle. These factors gave rise to intense concern about the future and created a crisis in class relations.

While attempting to maintain control over the growing resistance to English policies, urban Whig leaders searched for solutions to local economic problems. In Philadelphia, for example, a group of merchants erected a linen manufactory in 1764 and employed several hundred poor women there. But the project died within two years because the manufactory could not produce quality sailcloth, linen, and ticking as cheaply as English imports available in the shops.

Two years later a group of Quaker merchants proposed a striking new plan for administering relief. The taxpayers, they argued, were now supporting a record 220 paupers in the overcrowded almshouse. The merchants proposed to incorporate a group of private citizens who, in return for raising a substantial sum for constructing a large new almshouse, would be given control over the management of the poor. The Bettering House, as it came to be called, would consist of an almshouse for the aged and disabled and a workhouse for the able-bodied poor. Into the workhouse would go all out-pensioners who had formerly received direct cash payments from the overseers of the poor. Gathered together, they could be clothed and fed inexpensively. More important, they could contribute to their own maintenance. The assembly, grateful that Philadelphians were proposing to solve their own problem, gladly consented.

The Bettering House that rose on Spruce Street was more than a

monument to the philanthropic impulses of Philadelphia's Quakers; it was also a response to the swelling ranks of immigrant and itinerant poor who were seeking work in the city, the increasing cost of relief, and the spreading notion that poor rates were rising because more and more people were content to live the life of the idler, the profligate, or the street beggar rather than pursue an honest trade. The Bettering House was in fact a cross between Boston's workhouse, whose book of rules the Quaker managers purchased, and the Boston linen manufactory of the 1750s. Quaker leaders adopted a plan strikingly similar to the one that had proved a failure three hundred miles to the north.

The hand of Benjamin Franklin is highly visible in the organization of the Bettering House. Appointed to the assembly committee for reorganizing the poor law in 1763 and to another for erecting a workhouse in 1764, Franklin was no doubt carefully listened to, for he had an unmatched reputation as an architect of problem-solving urban institutions. He expressed the core of his thought in a letter written shortly after his return to England in 1765. Angered by the London poor's mobbing of grain wagons to prevent wheat exports at a time when bread was scarce, Franklin publicly advised that "the more public provisions were made for the poor, the less they provided for themselves, and of course became poorer. And, on the contrary, the less was done for them, the more they did for themselves, and became richer."⁵ Repeal the poor laws by which the indigent were supported, he advised, and the poor would go back to work.

Philadelphia did not adopt Franklin's drastic proposal to eliminate poor relief, but the decision to turn over to the Quaker merchants the management of the poor-relief system, with the Bettering House as its centerpiece, embodied the philosophy behind his proposals. Even the name of the institution indicated the growing tendency to regard the poor as flawed members of society who needed to be reformed rather than relieved. The old familial system now gave way to nonfamilial institutions, reflecting the emergence of the new social order.

Controlling the disbursement of all funds gathered under the poor-tax laws, the Bettering House managers worked to end the payment of out-pensions after the Bettering House opened in the fall of 1767. Despite considerable resistance to this policy, they ultimately succeeded in channeling all but about 15 percent of relief moneys into the institutional relief of people compelled to quit their abodes.

The decision to end out-relief embroiled the managers in a heated dispute with the overseers of the poor. Drawn mostly from the ranks

of established artisans and usually not members of the Society of Friends, the overseers were far closer to the needy in their neighborhoods. They understood the resentment of the non-Quaker poor who were being herded into a Quaker-dominated institution for their moral betterment. The fact that the Quakers had few poor of their own, since they were the best established economic group in the city and cared for their own indigent in a small Quaker almshouse, may have made the new policy all the more obnoxious. The overseers of the poor had been stripped of their power to distribute out-relief and were being pressured to send to the Bettering House persons who might make it through the winter with small sums of money and some firewood. They objected to carting the infirm and aged to the Bettering House, decried the "Cruelty" of "breaking up many Families" by sending members behind closed doors, and pointed out that because of the compulsory segregation of men and women there many husbands and wives were being miserably committed "to Live in a Separate State."⁶

Sharply criticized, the Quaker managers started issuing annual reports containing statistics on inmate production. Those who read the fine print, however, would have noticed that it was proving impossible to work the poor at a profit. The managers spent more each year to procure materials for manufacture and to pay supervisory salaries than they received from selling the products of the inmates' labor.

By 1775, after half a dozen years of controversy, all parties—the Quaker managers, the overseers of the poor, the taxpayers, and the poor themselves—were thoroughly disillusioned. Robert Honyman, an English doctor, was surprised when a number of women "begged me to try to get them out" of a reportedly model institution.⁷ The overseers of the poor engaged in a kind of sabotage by refusing to press their straitened neighbors for poor-tax payments, and tax collections fell further and further behind. The rising price of provisions, coinciding with only slight increases in the income derived from poor taxes, reduced what the managers had to work with. As for the reform of dissolute persons, the Quaker philanthropists simply gave up. The poor entered the Bettering House, then ran away, and were returned "mostly as sick, naked, and burthensome as at first, and proceed this way with Impunity, as often as they please." Work could be extracted from few of them, and so, the managers confessed, they "are entirely dead Weight."⁸

The attempts to deal with the poor revealed the limitations of Whig ideology as applied to internal social problems. Whig political theory,

especially in Philadelphia, had evolved in an environment of widespread opportunity for almost two generations before the end of the Seven Years' War. Hard work and frugality had led to material success, not only for merchants, professionals, and extraordinary lower-class sons such as Benjamin Franklin, but also for scores of artisans. Hence when poverty began to spread, the best-established part of the community, whose ideas had been formed in a different economic milieu, subscribed fully to Franklin's notion that "the best way of doing good to the poor is not making them easy *in* poverty, but leading or driving them *out* of it."⁹

The response of the poor indicates how deeply shaken was the concentration of cultural authority in the upper class in this troubled era. The poor—and many lower-echelon artisans—staunchly resisted the ideology reflected in the Bettering House solution to poverty, even though it had the support of a wide range of city leaders. Those who had known better days "declared in a Solemn manner that they would rather perish through want" than go to the Bettering House.¹⁰ They scraped by as best they could, aided by friends, churches, and charitable societies. Those who could not escape confinement did as little labor as possible within the walls.

The failure of the poor to play the role assigned to them reveals much about the deep fissures that were appearing in northern urban society. In New York, rather than acting the part of grateful supplicants, the poor looked to the affluent as an exploiting class that owed them relief, not because charity required it but because justice demanded it. It was the poor, one of their spokesmen wrote in 1769, "who, by their Industry heretofore, have contributed so much to make our Circumstances easy: It is to the meaner Class of Mankind, the industrious Poor, that so many of us are indebted for those goodly Dwellings we inhabit, for that comfortable Substance we enjoy, while others are languishing under the disagreeable Sensations of Penury and Want."¹¹ Other writers pointed to the class injustice represented by the astounding increase in expensive carriages in New York—from five to seventy in the four years after the Peace of Paris—while at the same time laboring people were selling their household goods to pay rents to rich landlords.¹²

In all the northern seaports poverty and unemployment also inspired new attempts to do what had proved impossible in Boston in the 1750s: erect large buildings, fill them with spinning wheels and looms, recruit cheap labor, and manufacture cloth at a profit. The nonimportation

movements, it was believed, would raise the demand for domestic cloth through a combination of patriotic sentiment and a shortage of English-produced material. The hope of providing employment for the poor converged neatly with the desires to lower poor taxes and to pressure England into repealing repugnant policies.

During the first nonimportation movement, which accompanied the Stamp Act protests, merchants in New York and Philadelphia set up cloth manufactories and recruited several hundred poor women to work in them. Both factories collapsed, however, when the resumption of English imports in 1766 flooded urban markets with better-quality goods and consumers made their preferences known.

All three port towns tried cloth manufacturing again during the second nonimportation movement, in 1767–1770. New York's manufactory employed more than three hundred poor people by early 1768. In Philadelphia the managers of the new Bettering House purchased "sundry Looms, Wheels, Sleigh Geers, Shuttles &c" from the defunct linen manufactory and set their captive labor force to work without any wages.¹³

Boston moved more slowly. A committee appointed in October 1767 to study the situation returned in January 1768 with a plan for using the old Manufactory House for the production of sailcloth. It obtained the town's permission to proceed but did not get the £3,000 interest-free loan it requested, and the scheme died. In March 1769 the town meeting again considered ways of employing the poor. This time a committee proposed to teach large numbers of women and children to spin. The new plan differed from its predecessors in several regards. First, no suggestion was made that the women and children should actually work in the manufactory; the presumption is strong that they were to remain in their homes, spinning yarn as household routines allowed. Second, the man who stepped forward to manage the project was William Molineux, one of the most important radical leaders in Boston. Molineux had come to Boston in the 1740s and developed a substantial business as a hardware merchant. He suffered badly in the post-1760 depression. Never before involved in politics, he now entered the public arena and rose rapidly in radical Whig circles. Whenever confrontations were staged with the governor or with Tory merchants who refused to comply with the nonimportation agreements, Molineux was at the head of the crowd. Whereas the shoemaker MacIntosh had named his son Pascale Paoli after the Corsican revolutionary, the new director of Boston's legion of poor spinners was himself known as "Paoli" Molineux.



Even Molineux's direction of the cloth manufactory did not enjoy complete success. Neither he nor anyone else could solve Boston's poverty problem or substantially lower the costs of poor relief. But because he made no attempt to coerce Boston's poor women into factory work and enjoyed great popularity among the lower classes he did better than his predecessors. Molineux could never by force of personality accustom Bostonians to repetitive, confining, year-round labor, nor could he solve the problems of the erratic supply of raw materials and lack of technologically skilled personnel needed to turn out cloth of fine quality. But he adjusted to these realities, suspending operations during the winter, obtaining the services of English-trained "manufacturers" for dying and finishing the cloth, and letting women and children work in their homes rather than attempting to impose an industrial discipline on them. His relative success also owes much to the Whig campaign to turn spinning into a patriotic activity and a symbol of defiance against England. Under radical Whig leadership the manufacture of cloth took on a political character and became a part of the self-denying zeal and reaffirmation of community by which well-to-do radical Whigs hoped to bind the lower classes to their leadership.

In Philadelphia the attempt to manufacture cloth finally succeeded in the year before the Revolution. The movement for domestic manufacturing had received a healthy impetus from the last nonimportation movement as radical protests against England careered to a climax in 1774 and 1775. Also, the pool of impoverished and unemployed persons in the city had never been greater. Both factors were important in the success of the United Company of Philadelphia for Promoting American Manufactures. By themselves, however, they probably would not have guaranteed success, and certainly not the kind that enabled the company to provide employment for nearly five hundred persons and to declare a dividend two years after its first meeting.

Three other factors allowed the company to succeed as had none of its predecessors in the port towns through a quarter-century of experimentation. First, the company allowed women to spin at home, as time and familial responsibilities allowed, and to bring their yarn to the factory for payment. Second, this system enabled the company to avoid heavy capital expenditures for a large building to accommodate hundreds of spinners. Instead, it rented a house for a mere £40 per year for the looms and dyeing equipment. This allowed the company to begin operations quickly and to put its money into equipment rather

than buildings. Third, the company was organized and operated by a group of middling men, many of them artisans, who came from mixed religious and ethnic backgrounds, had close ties to the poor in their neighborhoods, and were deeply involved in radical politics. The president of the company was Daniel Roberdeau, an important radical leader and shortly to be elected commander of the Pennsylvania militia. James Cannon, a radical schoolteacher and principal author of the radical Constitution of 1776, was secretary. The twelve-man Board of Managers included five members of the radical Committee of 100, elected five months after the company organized to enforce nonimportation. While production figures plummeted at the Bettering House, run by wealthy Quaker merchants, they soared at the United Company of Philadelphia, run by popular leaders with close ties to the laboring people and an ability to convince them that spinning and weaving contributed to the defense of liberty against a selfish and despotic crown.

The Ideological Spectrum

How urban dwellers perceived and experienced economic change after 1765 varied markedly according to their position in society. Thomas Hutchinson, who had riches aplenty but little peace of mind as he tried to govern Massachusetts from 1770 to 1774, blithely concluded that north of Maryland "you scarce see a man destitute of a competency to make him easy."¹⁴ Many others, equally oblivious to growing penury in their midst, shared the perpetual optimism that comes easily to those in comfortable circumstances—they saw nothing amiss in America and wished only for the troublemaking radicals to sink into oblivion. At the other end of the spectrum were pitiable persons such as John McCleary, who scratched out pathetic requests for assistance to the overseer of the poor in his North End ward: "I hope you will be so kind as to Lett Me have a Little wood for I have not had one Stick to burn since I wrote you before and I am almost perished with the Cold," or "the Room that I lye in is all over Run with water."¹⁵

Between these two extremes stood the majority of merchant seamen, laborers, artisans, shopkeepers, professionals, and merchants of the port towns. For the most favorably positioned of them, onerous new trade regulations, restrictions on the issuing of paper currency, violent expansion and contraction of credit, heavy taxes, and strict customs enforcement were causes of anxiety. Trade continued, sometimes at very

high levels, and artisan production continued, though unevenly. But the burdens of the mercantilist connection with England and the prospects for an independent economic order that the boycotts of the era aroused among urban artificers, along with the disturbing sight of poverty and unemployment among the lowest ranks, nurtured a profound uneasiness among many concerning the course of economic change and the future of their world. It was hard to ignore the fact that in all the cities the largest buildings erected after 1765—cloth manufactories, almshouses, and prisons—were constructed to contain the impoverished, a growing criminal element spawned by poverty, and a noncriminal middle-class group whose only offense against society was an inability to weather the economic storms of the period. This was not the world of their fathers.

Despite a general relationship between the circumstances of urban people's everyday lives and their susceptibility to particular ideas, there was no strict correspondence between occupation or wealth and ideological outlook. The two broadly prevailing ideologies themselves overlapped at some points and those subscribing to them were by no means unified on all issues.

The reigning ideology of eighteenth-century America was Whig. One group, which can be loosely designated conservative Whigs, included a large part of the urban gentry, especially import-export merchants, important officeholders, many lawyers and clergymen, and a sprinkling of lesser men who by temperament or family ties were connected to this generally affluent group. By and large these prosperous men adhered to the canons of Whig political theory, including balanced government, the vital role of a legislature elected by propertyholders, and equal justice before the law. In the port towns many were Anglicans from families whose wealth stretched back several generations, and they often had close connections in England, both to large mercantile houses and to important men in government. They openly espoused international trade and capitalist relations and in this limited sense were "modernizers." In their social philosophy, however, they were profoundly conservative. Hierarchy and order imposed from above were the central tenets of their social credo. They believed deeply that the "multitude, who have not a sufficient stock of reason and knowledge to guide them," should defer to their betters. They were rationalists who subscribed to many Enlightenment ideas, and they took pride in their roles as leaders of their communities.

The conservative Whigs included the placeholders and wealthy mer-

chants around Thomas Hutchinson in Boston, the members of the Anglican-based, mercantile-led proprietary faction in Philadelphia, and the merchants and lawyers of the DeLancey party in New York. Their central goals after 1765 were to keep resistance to English policies within orderly bonds and, in the face of the Stamp Act demonstrators' affronts to authority and social order, to preserve their power in the capitals as leaders and officeholders of the court party. Many of them would become loyalists; others would maintain a precarious neutrality during the war. Still others would swallow their distrust of a radicalized polity and emerge during and after the war as leaders of a movement to reverse what they regarded as the dangerous excesses of the revolutionary era.

A second group of Whigs, who may be labeled liberals, was composed of some wealthy import-export merchants and many more local traders, ship captains, unpedigreed lawyers, non-Anglican clergymen, small manufacturers, and craftsmen, especially those in the more remunerative trades. Economic growth had meant opportunity for most of them, and so long as the doors of opportunity were open, which most frequently meant access to capital and labor, they opted to participate in a social system that was by now only faintly disguising the pursuit of self-interest with traditional rhetoric about serving the public good. Many of them owned property, commanded the labor of slaves and indentured servants, and competed avidly in a world of credit, investment, and speculation. These were the men who led the opposition to England's closer regulation of American economic life, including limitations on their right to issue paper money, attempts to eliminate American middlemen from certain sectors of international marketing, and interference with smuggling, which they viewed as a means of opening channels of free trade in the face of monopolistic regulation.

In their political philosophy the liberal Whigs were far more open than the conservative Whigs to participatory public affairs. In Boston they celebrated the town meeting as an instrument for guarding the people's liberties, whereas the conservatives condemned it as an exercise in mobocracy. In New York they almost always controlled the common council and other elected municipal offices. In Philadelphia they levied and collected the taxes, supervised poor relief, and spearheaded civic improvement projects. They were strongly Lockean in their belief that liberty was essentially the condition of being secure in one's property, which they held in modest to substantial amounts, and they had little

desire to share political power with the unpropertied by extending the franchise or, in New York and Philadelphia, by instituting a town meeting system of local government. Because they were themselves products of intergenerational mobility, they did not shrink from the ideal of social fluidity as did the conservative Whigs; but they distrusted the growing mass of propertyless and impoverished city dwellers below them and sometimes suspected that such people lacked the cardinal qualities of industry and frugality that accounted for their own success. If social stability, acceptance of capitalistic economic relations, and political stewardship were the identifying tenets of the conservative Whigs, then equality of opportunity, enthusiasm for the market economy, and political liberty were those of the liberal Whigs. Their central goal after 1765 was to lead the movement to resist British policy, employing those below them as necessary to create mass protest without losing control of the popular assembly parties that they dominated.

The other widely popular ideology in the cities was Evangelicalism. Though overlapping with Whig ideology at many points, especially in its advocacy of balanced government, electoral institutions, and freedom of speech and the press, the Evangelicals expressed themselves in a different language of public discourse and had a different vision of the direction in which society ought to change. Like the Whigs, they were divided internally into two major groups. One of these, which may be called radicals, was composed of the lower elements in the urban social hierarchy—laborers, merchant seamen, and artisans in the least remunerative trades such as shoemakers, tailors, coopers, ship caulkers, and stocking weavers. Most slaves and indentured servants were also in this group ideologically. To all these people capitalist enterprise was of small concern, for they owned little property. They were socially (though not geographically) immobile, had limited aspirations, and clung to traditional ideas of a moral economy in which the fair wage and just price rather than free competition and the laws of supply and demand ruled. Family, pride in workmanship, religion, and community counted for more than capital accumulation. “Proud of [our] rank, we aspired no higher,” they asserted.¹⁶

In Boston the radical Evangelicals (along with many of the liberal Whigs) worked to sabotage the public markets, stopped the exportation of grain when food was in short supply, defended themselves against impressment and attempts to coerce their labor in workhouses, and attacked the mansions of the wealthy during the Stamp Act disturbances. Their leaders were sometimes drawn from their own ranks, such

as shoemakers Ebenezer MacIntosh in Boston and Samuel Simpson in Philadelphia, and sometimes from the middle stratum, with men such as Thomas Young, Alexander McDougall, and James Cannon, who themselves had risen out of poverty, retained bone-deep egalitarian notions, and still identified with the lowest ranks. Much of their consciousness harked back to the levelers of mid-seventeenth-century England. They found their folk heroes in men such as Cornet George Joyce, an obscure tailor in Cromwell’s army who in 1647 had captured Charles I, urged his death, and, according to folklore, stood at the executioner’s side when the ax fell.

A great social and economic distance separated these dispossessed and struggling residents of the port towns from the conservative Whigs, who saw them as rabble whose profligacy consigned them forever to self-imposed poverty. In turn, the poor and unfree saw the mercantile elite as oppressors and believed that the laboring poor were “a vital part of God’s great plan for the redemption of the world.” Most of them would have agreed with Adam Smith, the great codifier of the rising philosophy of self-interest, that “Civil Authority, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all.”¹⁷ Less distance separated them from the liberal Whigs, with whom they sometimes joined forces.

The other major group of Evangelicals was made up of social reformers, mostly clergymen, with a sprinkling of middle-class doctors, lawyers, tradesmen, and teachers. Unified primarily by a highly moralistic temperament, they shared with Whigs a commitment to political liberty and protection of property but simultaneously decried the Whig commercial spirit, which they believed was corrupting American society. They wanted to reverse the course of historical development, particularly to halt the growth of capitalistic activity, and to return society to its ascetic beginnings, when civic virtue, spartan living, and a disdain for worldly things had prevailed. For them the Revolution was the millennium.

It seems clear that this impulse to reverse the course of commercial development was much stronger in Boston than in New York and Philadelphia. One reason was the greater hold of the seventeenth-century past on New England. The Puritan ethic, with its suspicion of wealth and grudging tolerance of mercantile activity, persisted in Boston. Looking backward to ancestral virtue and communal attachment, some of the descendants of the Puritan founders saw the Rev-

olution as an opportunity to restore dedication to the "Corporate Christian values that stressed denial more than opportunity and social order more than mobility."¹⁸

In revolutionary situations those who speak for moral regeneration, root-and-branch reform, self-sacrifice, service to the common cause, and the possibility of perfecting society have a built-in advantage. To engage in revolution is to wipe the slate clean. Upon the fresh surface anything may be written, and those who speak for a *novus ordo saeculorum*—a new civil polity—are hard to resist. The social and political ideology of these spokesmen provided the major rationale for resisting English invasion of the liberties of Englishmen in America and a substantial impetus for the reformation of American society. Though resisting the Evangelical bias against the growth of commercial capitalism, many Whigs were tinged by the moral strictures of the reformers.

The reformers believed in classical republicanism or civic humanism, the principal elements of which were the sacrifice of individual interests to the pursuit of the common good (a characteristic so central that it became encapsulated in the word "virtue"); balanced government, which provided stability while guarding against corruption by any element of society; and the maintenance of a general equality in society, which would prevent concentration of political power and the oligarchy or despotism that inevitably followed. Republicanism was not a detailed plan of government; it was, more fundamentally, an attitude toward government, toward society, and toward the character of the people.

The clash between the Whig and Evangelical casts of mind is visible in the strong resistance to several elements of republicanism by broad segments of the urban populace. One point of tension was the republican notion that virtue, "the passion for pursuing the public good," was incompatible with the pursuit of private interest.¹⁹ Especially in the cities, though to some extent throughout the colonies, Americans had cleaved to the competing notion that the public good in a market society was best served by each individual's pursuing his own self-interest. This eventually became known as the ideology of economic liberalism, an elaborate defense of which was published in 1776 by Adam Smith.

A second element of republicanism that never gained acceptance among most urban people was the notion that commerce corrupts. American republicanism remained ambivalent on the subject. Many of its agrarian exponents vilified the cities, scourged trade, and heaped abuse on the urban Whig gentility for their ostentation and affluence.

But even farmers were tied into an Atlantic commercial network, so in the end most of the reformers succumbed to the doctrine of free trade.

The third element of republicanism that many in the cities could not easily digest was the emphasis on social equality. The republican writers saw an organic connection between economic and political power. They regarded general economic equality as absolutely essential to political freedom. The concentration of wealth led ineluctably to oligarchy. Republicanism could flourish only in a society of independent, roughly equal citizens. The chances of achieving this polity were greatest in simple, agricultural societies in which land was widely held and agrarian laws prevented the concentration of property. Advocates of such a society came to be known as the "country party."

For many Whigs in the cities, merchants foremost among them, the idea that a republican society must be based on general equality of condition was unacceptable. Given the course of colonial development, such equality could be accomplished only by a massive redistribution of property, and protection of property was one of the main incentives for resisting England. So equality and freedom, the latter defined as being secure in one's property, stood opposed to each other. Many of the Evangelicals, who wrote and published their pamphlets in the cities, minimized the issue of equality and concentrated instead on moral corruption and the need to reestablish a concern for the general welfare. John Adams was one of those who had read republican theory carefully enough to understand the connection between economic inequality and political corruption. In his manuscript of *Dissertation on the Feudal and Canon Law*, one of the most powerful republican statements of the 1760s, Adams wrote: "Property monopolized or in the Possession of a few is a Curse to Mankind. We should preserve not an Absolute Equality—this is unnecessary, but preserve all from extreme Poverty, and all others from extravagant Riches."²⁰ However, caught between Whig and Evangelical modes of thinking, and engaged as he was with wealthy Whig merchants in the early stages of resistance, Adams thought better of the statement and deleted it from his text. He never again called for smoothing out inequities in wealth. Most of the reformers chose not to speak about structural inequalities, but concentrated on defects in the colonial character as it had evolved over past generations. Morality became the badge of the reformers, and the radicals were left to bear the standards of equality.

It is the presence of these different ideologies—sometimes overlap-

ping, often antagonistic, none appearing in pure form, and all of them changing during these tumultuous years—that makes the urban experience after 1765 so difficult to comprehend. It is also what made the resistance movement and the social upheaval in the cities so difficult to control. Samuel Adams might inveigh that “Luxury & Extravagance are in my opinion totally destructive of those Virtues which are necessary for the Preservation of the Liberty and Happiness of the People.”²¹ Yet Adams, though himself devoid of capitalistic urges, was trying to lead a radical movement from New England’s largest commercial center and had to work with John Hancock, who lived high on the hill and stocked his cellar with the best Madeira wines. Hancock’s purse and prestige were vital to the success of the Massachusetts patriot movement, and he was not risking his life and fortune for a return to arcadian simplicity. Similarly, Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia believed that revolution would usher in the millennial Second Coming and achieve the purification of American society, but Rush had to march in step with John Dickinson, an urbane lawyer with a country estate, a retinue of slaves, and a fondness for the aristocratic life-style.

Thus different groups in the port towns began walking the road to revolution with different social ideals. Even within groups that had the same attitudes toward economic activity, such as the merchants and higher artisans, acrid divisions would arise as the Revolution drew nearer. What remains is to examine how these groups—especially merchants, manufacturers and master craftsmen, and the lower levels of the laboring classes—struggled after 1765 to maintain or acquire political power in order to implement their vision of the future. Why was the urban gentry so successful in maintaining its hold on the levers of power in Boston, somewhat less so in New York, and utterly unsuccessful in Philadelphia?

Resurgence of the Gentry in Boston

In Boston, where the Stamp Act disturbances had been most intense and the merchant-lawyer gentry had blanched as an impoverished shoemaker veteran of the Seven Years’ War gained control of the streets, the Whig leadership reasserted itself after 1765. “Captain-General” MacIntosh disappeared as a crowd leader and shortly after the Boston Massacre in 1770 was languishing in debtors’ jail.

The eclipse of MacIntosh did not bring peace to Boston’s streets. The arrival of the new Board of Custom Commissioners, which made

its headquarters in Boston in 1767, the imposition of the hated Townshend duties in the same year, and the arrival of British troops to occupy the recalcitrant town in 1768 all kept the Massachusetts capital in a state of turmoil. Nor did crowd activity or organized violence against crown officials end. The battering of customs official Benjamin Hallowell after his seizure of John Hancock’s ship *Liberty* in 1768, the confrontation with British troops on the icy night of March 5, 1770, and the Tea Party in 1773 are only the most spectacular of a series of incidents that made Boston by far the most turbulent northern seaport in the climactic years before the Revolution.

As the Whig leaders regained their influence with laboring people, they carefully drew a line between controlled violence directed at obnoxious crown officials and their supporters and mass violence that sprang from internal social grievances. James Otis, moderator of the town meeting in 1767, tried to smooth over interclass hostility by asserting that “let our burthens be ever so heavy, or our grievances ever so great, no possible circumstances, tho’ ever so oppressive, could be supposed sufficient to justify private tumults and disorders.”²² The *Boston Gazette*, the most influential paper among the laboring people, called repeatedly for “No Mobs or Tumults,” and early in 1768 Samuel Adams, now emerging as the principal radical leader, assumed the name “Populus” and wrote that the people should remain quiet and follow the *Gazette*’s advice—“NO MOBS—NO CONFUSIONS—NO TUMULTS.”²³ When effigies of Customs Commissioner Charles Paxton and Inspector General John Williams were discovered hanging from the Liberty Tree in the South End in March 1768, three members of the Loyal Nine cut them down before a crowd could assemble. Shortly after that an angry crowd, smashing windows and burning the property of customs officials in retaliation for the seizure of the *Liberty*, were dispersed by radical leaders who rushed to the scene crying “To your Tents O Israel.”²⁴

After 1766 Samuel Adams, who came closer than any other American to becoming a professional politician, emerged as the leader of the Whig resistance. Operating through the North End Caucus, the Masonic lodge, the fire companies, and the taverns, he was shortly known in England as one of the most dangerous men in the colonies. Although Adams spoke the language of the old Puritans, stressing the need for moral reform, an end to luxury and extravagance, and a return to the rustic simplicity of bygone days, his utopian vision did not prevent him from working effectively with Boston’s Whig merchants,

who sought the end of the tough new policy of trade regulation. From 1766 to 1770 Adams served on town meeting committees with the most politically active merchants, including John Hancock, who financed many of the patriotic celebrations and feasts that kept politics on everyone's mind and helped to build interclass bridges during these years.

Passage of the Townshend duties in 1767 put the revived Whig leadership to the test. Nonconsumption of British goods was the first response and helped to unify Boston's social ranks. Adams reveled in nonconsumption as a means of drawing every member of the community into a political fellowship, a latter-day Puritan community covenant whose common goal was repeal of the Townshend Acts. At the same time, eschewing imported British finery would "mow down luxury and high living in New England."²⁵ Adams had always been offended by mercantile affluence in Boston and liked to compare the ostentatious shows of wealth by Boston's rich with the humble rusticity of the Bay colony's founders. Boston's merchants could afford to endure these barbs, for in nonconsumption they saw their best chance of reversing British policy. For Boston's mechanics the economic boycott also had advantages because it provided the biggest boon to home manufacturing in the town's history.

The effectiveness of economic boycott depended on stopping all goods at the water's edge, and many merchants in Boston who were engaged in international trade and closely attached to the governor's interests had no intention of being bound by a community compact that had no force in law. Exhortation and insult could do only so much to change the minds of these high-placed men, who included many of the colony's largest importers. In the end persuasion of a more physical kind proved necessary. Street brigades were used to terrify uncooperative importers and to disrupt the work of the reinforced customs corps, which was increasingly effective in stopping the smuggling of Dutch tea, French molasses, and other contraband goods that had built the fortunes of many Whig merchants and provided employment for hundreds of artisans in the town. Whig leaders in 1768 began resorting to crowd action to "rescue" goods seized by customs officials and to intimidate them from doing their work when illegal goods were about to be landed. But Whig leaders continued to promote the distinction between violence directed at external enemies—or their local agents—and violence inspired by demands for internal reform.

During the years of nonimportation, from 1768 to 1770, Whig

leaders found two men who proved particularly effective in directing street crowds. The first was William Molineux, a small trader who was passionate for the Whig cause. Given to both rhetorical and physical violence, and down-to-earth enough to mingle easily with lesser artisans and waterfront roughnecks, Molineux was firmly connected to the merchant leadership that still controlled the town meeting and worked hand in hand with the best-established artisans and petty entrepreneurs who composed the Sons of Liberty. It was he who led nearly every mass action from 1768 to 1771.

The second important street leader and intermediary between the Whig leaders and the laboring classes of Boston during these years was Thomas Young, a doctor who had come in 1766 from Albany, New York. His hostility toward men of wealth and power, expressed earlier in his attacks on grasping landlords and speculators in New York, and his iconoclastic religious views made him an unlikely lieutenant of the merchant Whigs of Boston. He sat repeatedly on committees of the Sons of Liberty, the town meeting, and the North End Caucus, led crowds to enforce nonimportation, and participated in the Tea Party. Like Molineux, he also played a crucial role in halting undesired violence.

Young was far more radical than Boston's Whig leadership. Shortly after his arrival he was writing in the papers that an "increase of property," which made its owners "haughty and imperious" and "cruel and oppressive," was the great danger in government. "People of the lower ranks" must share political power in order to restrict the grip of the rich and powerful, and the town should have a building commodious enough to hold "all that chose to attend" the debates of the legislature. He referred to the common people as "those worthy members of society," the people who would "form the revolution of the other ranks of citizens."²⁶

With MacIntosh no longer at the center of mass politics, men such as Young and Molineux were vitally important to Whig leaders because they were popular among the artisans and laborers. The relationship was doubtless tenuous at times—both between these middle-class intermediaries and the lower ranks and between the merchant leadership and the intermediaries. On several occasions laboring Bostonians acted on their own, as in the waterfront brawls in 1769 and 1770 between ropewalk workers and moonlighting British soldiers. But through their street captains the Whig leaders regained, even if precariously, their direction of affairs in the town.

In 1770 the repeal of all the Townshend duties except the one on tea drove a wedge deep into the interclass Whig coalition in Boston. News of the impending repeal had reached the colony in December 1769, bringing many merchants to the verge of breaking ranks. Some of them had seen enough violence; others were eager to get black ink back on their ledgers. January 1, 1770, had been specified as the deadline of the original agreement, and immediately afterward a number of merchants began selling goods that had been stored in warehouses for months. Whig leaders responded by organizing the populace, male and female, franchised and unfranchised, free and bound, into a group styled "The Body of the People," a name heavily laden with covenant connotations, to descend on the merchants' meetings at Faneuil Hall. Four times in January 1770 the leaders around Samuel Adams called meetings of "The Body." Anti-British leaders, the conservative *Boston Chronicle* reported, went "trotting from house to house, to engage the master workmen to suffer their journeymen and apprentices to attend."²⁷ From twelve hundred to two thousand people responded.

The rift that appeared between merchants and mechanics is not hard to understand: most of the former had much to gain by resuming importation and most of the latter had much to lose. In the summer of 1770, when New York and Philadelphia merchants also resumed importing, conflict in Boston came to a head. By fall the interclass coalition verged on collapse. Moderate merchants had become convinced that mercantile interest had nothing further to gain from non-importation.

The broad division in Whig ranks continued to grow, and the Tea Act in 1773 widened it further. As before, economic sanctions were viewed as the most effective response to an obnoxious act. Seeking the broadest possible base, the radical leadership convened "The Body," defined as the entire community of concerned individuals. As many as five thousand turned out to determine an appropriate response to threats upon their liberties. The Committee of Correspondence, formed late in 1772 to promote unified intercolony action, adopted nonimportation as its formal response to the latest British outrage but took clandestine action of a less peaceful sort, organizing the destruction of £9,000 worth of tea.

Governor Hutchinson believed that although men of wealth were present, the huge crowds that gathered to decide what Boston should do with the tea consignees "consisted principally of the lower Ranks of the People"; "even Journeymen Tradesmen," he sputtered, "were

brought to increase the Number and the Rabble were not excluded."²⁸ The merchants tried desperately to head off a crisis with England by subscribing money to pay for the destroyed tea. At the same time they opposed the growing movement for nonimportation. England's response to the Tea Party was to pass the Coercive Acts, which closed Boston harbor until payment was made for the tea; virtually to end representative government in Massachusetts and its capital; and to put Boston under the military rule of General Thomas Gage. Samuel Adams and his cohorts, organizing resistance through the Boston Committee of Correspondence, countered with "The Solemn League and Covenant," a community compact, for boycotting all English goods.

The Solemn League and Covenant was beamed at the ordinary people and explicitly denigrated the merchants, who were all but excluded from the meaning of community. "This effectual plan," wrote the Committee of Correspondence, "has been originated and been thus carried through by the two venerable orders of men styled Mechanicks and Husbandmen, the strength of every community." No longer trust-

7. *View of Boston in 1774 by Paul Revere*



ing "mercantile Avarice," members of the committee carried the compact around the town, asking both men and women to sign it.²⁹

Most merchants now concluded that they must repulse those who were moving the populace along a suicidal course. They came in force to a town meeting in June 1774, intending to censure and abolish the Committee of Correspondence. The debate carried over to the next day, when the radical committee finally gained an overwhelming vote of confidence. The merchants trooped out, disheartened and bitter. One hundred thirty-seven of them promptly signed petitions protesting that the Solemn League would cripple Boston's trade. They were now irreparably divided from most of Boston's laboring people. Some merchants such as Hancock and John Rowe attempted to maintain a middle position, opposing nonimportation and eschewing the radical resistance leadership yet not going over publicly to the Hutchinson circle. But Boston was now under military rule and the die was cast.

What is most remarkable about the turbulent years after 1765 is that laboring people in Boston, though defiant of the British and more active in the streets than people in other port towns, were conspicuously inactive as a separate group and made virtually no demands for an enlargement of their role in the political process. The electorate continued to fill the important town offices with merchants, doctors, and lawyers. The same was true of the special committees appointed by the town meeting to recommend how the town should respond to such emergencies as the Massacre, the Tea Act, and the Port Act. The Committee of Correspondence and all the other ad hoc committees were routinely filled with professional men such as James Otis, Joseph Warren, Benjamin Church, and Thomas Young and the most anti-British merchants such as William Molineux, Nathaniel Appleton, Oliver Wendell, Caleb Davis, and Robert Pierpont.

Second, the artisans never organized a Mechanics Committee as in the other cities to push their own demands for internal reforms and made no demands for democratizing politics. The single change in the political *modus operandi* came in 1766 when the House of Representatives agreed to erect a public gallery at the instigation of the voters of Cambridge. This proposal passed because Whig politicians, seeking to broaden their support, decided to turn the House of Representatives into a "School of Political Learning," as Thomas Young put it.³⁰

Third, the lower artisans and laborers seem to have made no demands in Boston for a broadening of the suffrage, which was narrower at the beginning of the 1760s than in either New York or Philadelphia.

Finally, artisans' voices were conspicuously absent from Boston newspapers and broadsides, whereas in both New York and Philadelphia after 1767 dozens of partisan pleas were specifically addressed to or signed by "A Tradesman," "A Mechanic," "A Carpenter," or others who spoke for the laboring segment of urban society. In Boston radical Whig appeals emanated from "Publius," "Americanus," "Publicola," and other spokesmen of the corporate whole.

There are several reasons why challenges to the gentry's control in Boston receded after 1765. Of great importance was the presence of the British army, which served to focus the attention of all Bostonians on the external crisis with England and thus to mute interclass hostility. No less important in the submersion of social tension between ranks was the ability of the radical resistance leaders to employ the struggle against the English as a means of reaffirming the ancient Puritan concept of corporate communalism. By insisting that Boston must fight as a community against British oppression and traitorous townsmen who knuckled under to British perversions of constitutional rights, Samuel Adams and other leaders were able to convince laboring people that they were essential to the struggle for freedom, even if they could not vote. By a *de facto* inclusion of everyone in the political community, the radical leadership preempted demands for a broadened suffrage, for artisan officeholders, or for separate mechanics' organizations. This process began in 1767 when the nonconsumption pact was drawn up not by merchants, as in the case of the economic boycott of 1765, but by the town meeting, which then circulated the agreement among all the townspeople for signing.

In 1769, when Boston merchants began to break ranks on nonimportation, the resistance leaders began calling into action "The Body of the People," which included everyone, regardless of age, sex, rank, or voting status. Especially in policing the nonimportation agreement in 1768 and 1769, the people at large assumed the functions of civil government, ferreting out violators, fastening on them the opprobrium of the community, and coercing them to mend their ways. The humblest laborers on Boston's wharves, even adolescents and slaves, became part of the political community when they daubed the houses of importers with "Hillsborough paint," a peculiar recipe of body wastes, or pummeled zealous royal panjandruns who searched for smuggled goods. In this spirit, when some conservatives challenged the presence of unfranchised mechanics at an important town meeting in 1770, they were shouted down by men who argued that "if they had no Property

they had Liberty, and their posterity might have property."³¹ By the early 1770s the Boston town meeting itself was frequently convened as "The Body of the People."

A high degree of religious uniformity in Whig ranks and the ability of leaders such as Samuel Adams to turn the resistance movement into a kind of religious crusade also muted class discord and diverted attention from internal restructuring. In 1774 the notion of an interclass crusade, in which politics, religion, and morality were inseparable, was summed up in "The Solemn League and Covenant." Every Bostonian knew that this was the name of the alliance of Scottish and English Puritans who had labored twelve decades before to reform the Anglican church and had finally rebelled against Charles I. Now all latter-day Puritans—women as well as men—must reform a corrupt England by denying themselves imported goods, an act not only of economic coercion but also of self-denial and purification. Later in 1774 the Quebec Act, which established the Catholic religion and French law in the conquered Canadian territories, further heightened Boston Protestants' sense of the need to unite to resist the English government.

It was not only their receptivity to corporate ideology, the religious cast of the resistance movement, and the role they were given in "The Body of the People" that led Boston's laboring people to acquiesce in leadership from above in the decade after 1765. They were also well served by the economic policies of their leaders. Nonimportation was not uniformly beneficial to artisans and laborers, but it benefited a very substantial number. For those who were hurt the resistance leaders did what they could through make-work projects, primarily in textile production and in out-relief. When the Boston Port Act closed the harbor completely in mid-1774, laboring people were reduced to desperate straits; but by that time everyone was suffering and the Whig leaders could at least serve the laboring classes by directing the collection and distribution of poor-relief funds that were flowing in from other colonies.

Thus the forging of class consciousness and demands for a new social order, which burst forth in 1765 and might have been expected to crystallize in the most turbulent and disordered decade in Boston's history, were halted in their tracks. Many merchants became loyalists or tried to maintain a neutral position. A larger number, including most of the lesser merchants and inland traders, held their ground and learned that the mechanics and merchant seamen would accept their leadership if, in the name of the corporate community, their needs and

their political participation were considered, even if not legitimized in law.

Struggle for Power in New York

In New York the last decade before revolution witnessed the rapid growth of the techniques of popular politics, but Whig merchants and lawyers, both liberal and conservative, clung to political control until 1775. Of the three northern ports New York had by far the most liberal franchise and hence the largest number of laboring men participating in electoral politics, and more artisans there were elected to important municipal offices than in any other city. Yet they could not unite after 1765. The artisans did develop group consciousness, they gave vent to strong class feelings, and they deeply distrusted the men who occupied the leadership positions. But they were unable to use this collective identity to dislodge the city's wealthiest merchants until the shot heard around the world sent many of the latter into loyalist retirement.

In their participation in the formal political arena New York's laboring men were far in advance of their Boston and Philadelphia counterparts during these years. At least two-thirds of free adult males could vote, compared with less than half in Boston and Philadelphia, for freemanship in New York was not tied to property ownership but was available upon payment of a modest fee if one was of age and satisfied the residency requirement. Craftsmen were also elected to important city offices in substantial numbers. From 1761 to 1771, 61 percent of the constables, collectors, and assessors elected were artisans, compared with about 20 percent of the second-level officials in Boston and 46 percent in Philadelphia. Even more striking, 30 percent of the common councilmen chosen in New York from 1761 to 1775 were mechanics, whereas in Boston less than 10 percent of the selectmen and moderators were chosen from artisan ranks. It is also clear from the political broadsides and pamphlets in the elections of 1768 and 1769 that appeals for the votes of artisans and laborers were essential for winning office.

The exercise of political power outside formal political institutions also grew enormously in New York during the prerevolutionary decade. Mass meetings, at which everyone had a voice, and house-to-house canvassing became common. Thousands attended open-air gatherings on the issues of nonimportation in 1768, the quartering of British troops in 1769, the abandonment of nonimportation in 1770,

its reinstitution in 1773, and the Intolerable Acts in 1774. In 1770, opposing factions decided to resolve the importation question by going door to door, conducting what was perhaps the first public opinion poll in American history. The will of the people was being determined quite apart from whether individuals were franchised or not.

Artisan participation, however, did not necessarily bring artisan power, as laboring men learned in 1770, when most New York merchants privately agreed to abandon nonimportation after Parliament rescinded all the Townshend duties except the one on tea. Artisans regarded the merchants' actions as a betrayal of a community compact and concluded that only by forming associations of their own and developing an independent voice could they hope to achieve their patriotic goals and defend their own economic interests.

Since the merchants had shattered the united front, the mechanics determined to act autonomously. A broadside issued on May 2, 1770, dripped with sarcasm at the defecting merchants. They had initially agreed to nonimportation, it was charged, in order "to collect in their debts, to vend their moth-eaten fragments, and to clear at least fifteen percent." Mechanics, in their view, were only "two legged pack horses . . . created solely to contribute to the ease and affluence of a few importers," and "a kind of beast of burden, who . . . may be seen in a state but should not be heard." After resuming importation, the merchants, it was recommended, should bend their efforts toward erecting a new manufactory where mechanics and their families, who were "inured to the severest bodily labour," would be compelled to work. When they expired, merchants could skin them and take their hides to the company tanyards. Another manufactory could be erected at the taxpayers' expense "for dressing, currying, and tanning the said hides" of laboring people and the profits could then be handed over to the merchants.³² Productive labor, in this Swiftian satire, was now pitted against capitalist investment.

Despite growing class consciousness and alienation from the merchant gentry, New York's laboring men could not unite in these years. The artisan vote was deeply split in both 1768 and 1769 between the conservative DeLancey and moderate Livingston parties. The house-by-house canvass in 1770 produced 1,180 signatures for resuming importation and only 350 for maintaining the boycott, although the Sons of Liberty claimed that bribes or misunderstanding produced most of the signatures for resuming trade.

As in the other ports, artisans generally favored nonimportation

because it gave them a protected market. Those who benefited especially were artificers in the metal crafts and textile production; furniture-, coach-, and instrumentmakers; and shoemakers, saddlers, hatters, and glovers—those who produced for the gentry, who had previously purchased these items from England. Those whom nonimportation could not help, and often hurt, were building craftsmen, the ship construction trades, petty retailers, and some woodworkers such as coopers and turners. They were hurt in a general economic decline that, at least according to the importing merchants, was the inevitable result of economic boycott. Mariners, who were numerous and extremely active in resistance activities, were not affected much by nonimportation, because the volume of tonnage in and out of New York did not decline during periods of nonimportation but was merely rechanneled elsewhere or continued to England in items such as furs and grain, which were not included in the nonintercourse sanctions.

Personal loyalty had another, more important dimension, which may be labeled economic clientage. Many master artisans owned their own houses and shops, worked independently to fill customers' orders, and thus were at least partially insulated from economic pressure from above. Far more numerous were those beholden to merchants, lawyers, and urban landholders who controlled their rents, job opportunities, credit, and even personal affairs. Seventy percent of the mechanics who voted in the 1768 and 1769 elections or obtained voting rights in 1770 could not qualify to vote as freeholders—owners of £40 of real property. Most of these were tenants whose rent and house tenure were at risk as they stepped to the polling place. For many others, such as mariners and ship construction workers, jobs were at stake because merchants controlled the investment capital necessary for maritime construction and their ship masters could give or withhold berths as they pleased. Even though the system of dependent labor was weakening, an extensive network of economic clientage remained.

Economic dependency also existed in the other port towns, but in New York it translated into political loyalty to an unusual degree because only there was voice balloting, called *viva voce* voting, used instead of the secret ballot. Each shipwright, shoemaker, baker, and laborer had to step forward and publicly announce his preference before the assembled gentry. This voting method canceled out all the supposedly greater political power that the more lenient franchise requirements and the tradition of artisan officeholding seemed to confer.

In 1769 New York's popular leaders and their laboring-class sup-

porters launched an all-out effort to substitute a system of secret balloting such as Boston and Philadelphia had used for decades. The previous year Oliver DeLancey and his wealthy cohorts had "posted themselves at the approaches to the City's election green" and "coaxed and bullied each voter as he strode to the poll" to announce his choice.³³ The campaign for secret balloting, led by the liberal Whigs, reached its height in late 1769 and early 1770. Newspaper and broadside writers argued that if this "antidote to Corruption" was passed by the assembly "no Man of Opulence will be able to procure a Seat . . . by an undue influence upon the Fears of the Electors."³⁴ But after rallies and counterrallies, petitions and counterpetitions, the voice vote remained entrenched. New York's representatives, all wealthy merchants of the DeLancey faction, paid little heed to the broad demand for reform, voting unanimously against the balloting bill in the assembly in January 1770. Even so, the vote ended in a twelve-twelve tie, but went down to defeat on the speaker's negative vote.

The power of viva voce voting to intimidate voters from the lower ranks, especially in times of economic hardship, when artisans and laborers needed credit and employment, explains much about the failure of laboring New Yorkers to unite. It casts in a new light the merchants' house-by-house poll of their tenant-tradesmen in 1770, whose results showed a two-thirds majority in favor of resuming full commercial ties with England. Leaders of the lower ranks attempted to instill courage in ordinary people by calling a meeting for resisting the petition, but the knocks on the door could not go unanswered. Despite its democratic appearance, the house-to-house canvass was simply another form of political arm-twisting.

After the détente in British-American relations in 1771 and 1772 the radical resistance leaders of New York, who had experienced such difficulties in unifying laboring men, made their final push. When news of the Tea Act reached the city, Alexander McDougall and others distributed fifteen hundred copies of a broadside entitled *Association of the Sons of Liberty*, which condemned those who accepted consignments of East India Company tea as traitors and declared a boycott of their businesses. Two thousand New Yorkers stood in the rain at a mass rally in December 1773 to approve a total ban on tea. But tea leaves proved not to be the issue that could unite laboring men either for opposition to British policies or for the promotion of internal reforms. Even though New Yorkers staged their own tea party, destroying a small shipment that Captain James Chambers attempted to smuggle

into the city in April 1774, the radicals could not maintain their momentum. In fact the tea episode so frightened conservative New Yorkers that they began an all-out effort to reassert their authority. One writer, a sworn foe "to *Cobblers and Tailors* so long as they take upon their everlasting and immeasurable shoulders the power of directing the loyal and sensible inhabitants of the city," declared the determination of propertied men to halt popular action. More and more the question became who would control the extralegal committees that were called into being by mass meetings of the people. "After the destruction of Captain Chamber's tea and some other violent proceedings of the pretended patriots," wrote Governor Colden, "the principal inhabitants began to be apprehensive and resolved to attend the meetings of the inhabitants when called together by hand bills."³⁵

Another test of the locus of political power came when New Yorkers had to decide how to respond to the closing of the port of Boston in May 1774. Separate meetings were called by the importing merchants and by small traders and artisans. For several days the two groups contested the appointment of a committee to stay in touch with the Boston Committee of Correspondence and to hammer out a policy for New Yorkers. Indicative of their growing class consciousness, the artisans now formed a Mechanics Committee, which soon superseded the Sons of Liberty and nominated a slate of twenty-five persons to correspond with Boston's resistance leaders and to enforce any new economic boycott. The Merchants Committee responded with a slate of fifty-one, which included some of the Sons of Liberty as a concession but was predominantly conservative. As an impasse with England approached, the voters were asked to decide which slate should be presented for popular endorsement. The young aristocrat Gouverneur Morris reported "a great concourse of the inhabitants" on May 19 to contend "about the future forms of our government, whether it should be founded upon Aristocratic or democratic principles." Looking down on the crowd from a balcony, Morris described the scene: "on my right hand were ranged all the people of property, with some few dependents, and on the other all the tradesmen."³⁶

The meeting produced a victory for the conservative merchants, whose Committee of 51 was chosen. "You may rest assured," wrote one jubilant patrician, "no non-im[portation], nor non-exportation will be agreed upon . . . The power over our crowd is no longer in the hands of Sears, Lamb, or such unimportant persons . . . Their power . . . expired instantly upon the election of the . . . Fifty-one."³⁷

Although New York's conservative merchants squelched the commercial boycott and stifled the movement for internal reform, they had not reckoned with the possibility that their hard-won ground would be cut from under them by the First Continental Congress, which met in Philadelphia in the fall of 1774. New York's four delegates represented the sentiments of the victorious conservatives, but they could not prevent the formation of a Continental Association that pledged all the colonies to adhere to a step-by-step cessation of commercial relations with Great Britain. This gave a tremendous boost to the mechanics of New York, and they used it to secure nearly half of the places on the Committee of 60 that was selected at the end of the year to enforce the association. By the following April, when fighting broke out at Lexington and Concord, public order was crumbling in New York, and the DeLanceyites, who had controlled the extralegal committees, were resigning their places and establishing their credit with the loyalist element around the governor. They had held on tenaciously to the very end.

Interclass relations in New York were significantly different from those in Boston, although in both cities British soldiers became the target of much of the resentment that the poor and unemployed might otherwise have channeled into efforts to restructure society. It was the vote of James DeLancey for the Quartering Act in 1769 that drove radical resistance leaders Sears and Lamb to reunite with McDougall and the moderate Livingston-led party. Their followers doggedly defended the Liberty Pole against royal soldiers in the fall of 1766 and fought them intermittently thereafter. Two bloody fights between troops and populace on Golden Hill and in Nassau Street in 1770 served as equivalents to the fracas that led to the Boston Massacre in the same year. Unemployment and high food prices were the issues for those in the lowest levels of the economy, but impressment by the British navy and moonlighting by British soldiers provided the most immediate focuses for their discontent.

A second reason for the absence of a strong artisan bloc in politics, despite growing class hostility, was the lack of a secret ballot, which restricted collective action. When laboring men were forced by canvasses or public polls to declare themselves, some gave their support to those with economic power over them. Rather than displaying political deference or internalizing the values of their superiors, laboring New Yorkers were responding to a pervasive use of economic leverage from above.

Another factor affecting the coalescence of artisans and laborers in New York was religious tension, particularly between Presbyterians and Anglicans. Religious ties were strong among many people and cannot be ignored; but too much can also be made of them. Shoemakers and bakers, whose religious affiliations varied, voted decisively for the Livingston party in 1768 and 1769, and cartmen unified behind the DeLanceyites in 1774 to endorse the Committee of 51. These are clues that the political preferences of laboring men were determined less by religion than by considerations of economic survival. Yet the large degree of religious homogeneity that promoted interclass unity among Whigs in Boston did not exist in New York.

The power of New York's gentry also owed something to the sheer strength of conservative merchants and professionals to resist pressure from below. More merchants in Boston joined the forces of resistance than in New York, and the most flexible retained their power by convincing laboring people that their cause was one. A greater proportion of New York's merchants were diehard conservatives and wished to concede nothing to reformers. Animated "by fear of a civil war" and by anxiety that "the levelling spirit of New England should propagate itself into New York," the elite spoke not the language of covenant but the language of an embattled class.³⁸ When the time came for a final decision, they joined the loyalist cause in numbers unmatched in any other port town, leaving a partial vacuum into which artisan radicals could step.

Once war became a certainty and conservatives began abandoning New York, the city teemed with cries for social reform. When Whig leaders proposed the drafting of a constitution, the Mechanics Committee demanded popular ratification of any document produced and a provision for "an uncontrolled power to alter the constitution in the same manner that it shall have been received."³⁹ Throughout the first half of 1776 the city's newspapers were filled with articles proposing annual assembly elections, rotation of offices, secret balloting, universal adult male suffrage, equal apportionment, popular election of local officials, and the abolition of slavery and of imprisonment for debt. In the last months before the Revolution the city seethed with artisan voices and artisan action, as the wealthy fled in anticipation of military occupation by the army of the Continental Congress and patriotic committees of inspection disarmed the Tories.

Liberal Whig leaders such as John Jay, Philip Schuyler, James Duane, and Robert Livingston had eagerly sought the support of the lower

ranks in their opposition to English policies; but on internal issues they resisted pressure from below and countenanced far less extensive reform than their social inferiors. In repulsing most of the demands of lower-class radicals, New York's liberal Whigs were greatly aided by the arrival of Washington's continental troops in the spring of 1776.

Radical Triumph in Philadelphia

Philadelphia artisans had participated least in political affairs before 1765, and during the Stamp Act crisis they were so deeply split that one group of mechanics had opposed another group. Yet laboring men in Philadelphia coalesced so well after 1770 that this was the place where artisans most effectively infiltrated the extralegal committee structure and took the most radical steps to reform society internally.

Before 1770 artisans seldom held office in Philadelphia, except occasionally as an overseer of the poor, street commissioner, or tax collector. But artisan voices were rising in answer to economic insecurity. Writing in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* in 1767, "Tom Trudge" expressed his objection to the annual road tax that went primarily to pave the roads and remove the refuse in parts of the city where the well-to-do were concentrated. The poor, like himself, "sup on a cup of skim milk and have a parcel of half-naked children about our doors"; but rarely did they see the city dung carts come to their "penurious" alleyways. Why should they pay "for cleaning the yards of the opulent merchants and gentry"?⁴⁰

Philadelphia's artisans exerted themselves as a separate political entity for the first time in the spring of 1768 in attempting, like their counterparts in Boston and New York, to spur foot-dragging merchants to adopt a nonimportation policy. Not until March 1769, a year after Boston and New York had adopted nonimportation, did this popular pressure succeed, and by then the artisans' disillusionment with the merchants was widespread. The merchants attempted to break free of the nonimportation agreement early in 1770, imperiously informing the mechanics that they had "no Right to give their sentiments respecting an importation" and calling them "a Rabble."⁴¹

It took nothing more to convince the artisans that they must work independently for their objectives and even assume responsibility for setting and enforcing the community's goals. They called a public meeting of their fellows in May 1770 and formed their own Mechanics Committee, four years before a similar all-craft organization was es-

tablished in New York. They managed to delay the abandonment of nonimportation and showed how far deference toward the merchants had crumbled by promising in June that importing merchants "will be dealt with by the Mechanics Committee."⁴²

By the fall of 1770 merchants were importing again and artisans were on the move. For the first time in many decades an artisan ran for sheriff. Artisans soon began to fill positions as tax assessors and collectors, wardens and street commissioners, and insisted on their right to participate equally with merchants and gentlemen in the nomination of assemblymen and other important officeholders. Addressing his "Brethern the Tradesmen, Mechanics, &c," an artisan who called himself "Brother Chip" gave notice that laboring men would no longer tamely endorse men nominated by the elite, who were always from the upper class.⁴³

The assembly election in 1770 was a turning point in Philadelphia politics. Brother Chip's strident call, published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, marked the beginning of a new political party, strongly Presbyterian and laboring class in composition, strongly radical in its opposition to British policies, and bent on restructuring society internally. Organizing a new ticket, which included tailor Joseph Parker, the first tradesman to run for the assembly since the 1680s, the emerging radical party won at the polls. "Many Threats, Reflections, Sarcasms, and Burlesques" were hurled against the artisans, according to one Philadelphia merchant, but this kind of abuse did little to deter them; secret balloting kept them largely immune from the economic influence of those they offended.⁴⁴

Inspired by success in electing their own kind to important offices, Philadelphia's artisans began pressing the legislature in 1772 for economic programs that would benefit them. They opposed excise taxes on liquor because they fell with greatest weight on "the middling and poorer Class of the inhabitants." Similarly, they declared that a Leather Act that drove up the price of skins "oppresses the Poor, by Shoes being considerably advanced in Price."⁴⁵ At a meeting in October 1772 artisans issued a call for weekly publication of the full assembly debates and roll calls on important issues—a demand indicative of their distrust of patrician legislators and of their determination to vote only for those who responded to their needs. They also challenged "the absurd and Tyrannical custom of shutting the Assembly doors during debate" and demanded the erection of public galleries there.⁴⁶ The artisans won legislative approval on all points. It was enough to leave some genteel

Philadelphians muttering, "It is Time the Tradesmen were checked—they take too much upon them—they ought not to intermeddle in State Affairs—they will become too powerful."⁴⁷

The power of the port towns' most unified and aggressive artisan community showed itself dramatically in Philadelphia's response to the closing of Boston harbor in 1774. As in New York, conservative merchants and lawyers realized that they must assert themselves, both to head off another nonimportation movement and to prevent the extralegal committee system, to which more and more civil authority was falling, from slipping into the hands of the radicals. Some of Philadelphia's popular leaders, such as Charles Thomson, joined with the more conservative merchants to construct a fusion ticket of nineteen candidates, composed primarily of well-to-do merchants, to act as a Committee of Correspondence for coordinating strategies of resistance with other cities. But the artisans called their own meeting, assembled twelve hundred strong at the statehouse on June 9, 1774, and forced their way into what they called the "Merchants Committee." Faced with this kind of artisan power, the Whig leaders made broad concessions. They dropped two merchant committeemen obnoxious to the artisans and added four Germans, including a baker and a tanner, and six other tradesmen put forward by the Mechanics Committee. About one-third of the resulting Committee of 43, which assumed direction of the city's response to the Boston Port Act, were artisans and small manufacturers—a far cry from New York's Committee of 51, which was composed entirely of merchants and lawyers.

The contrast among the northern ports was equally evident in the elections of enforcement committees after the Continental Congress scheduled a full-scale boycott of English trade in October 1774. Even the fact that the meeting was held in Carpenters Hall rather than in the statehouse was a symbolic victory for artisan radicals, and they accounted for thirteen of the twenty-four inspectors chosen to supervise the election of a sixty-six-person Committee of Inspection. Recognizing their growing strength, the mechanics put forward a radical ticket that excluded every leading conservative from the previous Committee of 43 and gave places to artisans, shopkeepers, and minor merchants from the city's various religious groups and neighborhoods. A conservative merchant slate went down to defeat. Both of the tradesmen's main demands—one reflecting external concerns, one internal—had been fulfilled: that Pennsylvania commit itself unequivocally to an economic boycott and that they participate fully in the extralegal government by committee.

The New York and Boston committees elected in November 1774 to enforce the Continental Association also represented a victory for the radical Whig resistance to the latest British policy, but the composition of the committees reveals the differences in the dynamics of internal social relations. In New York the conservatives still had enough power to oblige the radicals to accept a fusion ticket rather than present the electors with a clear choice of slates, as in Philadelphia. Moreover, the slate of sixty included twelve merchants who would later become loyalists. In Boston the Committee of 63 had no conservative merchants because the Whig leadership had no need to concede anything to a group that had been isolated from the majority of Boston's patriots for several years. Ten artisans, well-situated men such as silversmith Paul Revere, sailmaker Norman Greenough, and blacksmith Richard Boylston, were also represented on the committee. But only in Philadelphia had artisans operating as a self-conscious group been able to grasp the levers of political action.

The implications of this maturing of artisan consciousness became evident in the final year before the Revolution. A new surge of radicalism, led by Thomas Young, James Cannon, Thomas Paine, and Timothy Matlack and centered in the thirty-one companies of the Philadelphia militia that had been organized in the spring of 1775, produced demands for the most radical reforms yet suggested in the colonies. The themes of curbing the individual accumulation of wealth, opening up opportunity, divorcing the franchise from property ownership, and driving the mercantile elite from power became explicit in a flood of polemical literature. "Our great merchants . . . [are] making immense fortunes at the expense of the people," charged a "Tradesman" in April 1775. Sounding the tocsin on economic inequality, which English and European republican writers had stressed but genteel American Whigs saw fit to ignore, Tradesman argued that the merchants "will soon have the whole wealth of the province in their hands, and then the people will be nearly in the condition that the East-India Company reduced the poor natives of Bengal to." Men of this kind must be stopped in "their present prospect of making enormous estates at our expense." Once their "golden harvests" were ended, "all ranks and conditions would come in for their just share of the wealth."⁴⁸ Tradesman and others envisioned an independence that included greater economic equality.

By the fall of 1775 the Philadelphia militia had become a school of political education, much in the manner of Cromwell's New Model Army. Organizing their own Committee of Correspondence, the pri-

vates began exerting pressure on the assembly to take a more assertive stand on independence. They also made three radical demands for internal change: first, that militiamen be given the right to elect their officers, rather than only their junior officers, as the assembly had specified in the militia law; second, that the franchise be conferred on all militiamen, regardless of age and economic condition; and third, that the assembly impose a heavy financial penalty, proportionate to the size of his estate, on every man who refused militia service, and use this money to support the families of poor militiamen.

The greater ability of Philadelphia's laboring classes to organize and to assert their collective strength was best exemplified in the move to broaden the franchise to include the propertyless and the poor. Coming at a time when a decreasing number of the laboring class held property, this break with the past was of enormous significance. It swept away the traditional view that propertyholding was proof of political competence. In New York and Boston, where the franchise was broad but where economic derangements had impoverished many former propertyholders and hence disqualified them from voting, there was no move to follow Philadelphia's example. The liberal Whig gentry, especially in Boston, were able to maintain control of the political process and to prevent any move toward separating political rights from property ownership.

Why did group consciousness and class power proceed furthest in the city where laboring people had been most deeply divided and least politically active only eleven years before independence? One factor was the absence of the British army, which in Boston and New York had acted as a lightning rod for artisan discontent, especially in times of scarce employment, and had promoted interclass unity by serving as a visible common enemy. Philadelphia never saw more than a token military force.

A second factor was the ability of radical leaders, such as the small merchant Charles Thomson, schoolteacher James Cannon, itinerant physician and organizer Thomas Young, physician Benjamin Rush, apothecary Christopher Marshall, hardware retailer Timothy Matlack, and instrumentmaker David Rittenhouse, to overcome religious factionalism in what had always been a religiously heterogeneous town. In Boston religious homogeneity and the adroit promotion of political action by "The Body of the People" curbed the growth of class identity. In New York Anglican-Presbyterian enmity, though not a major factor, could never be completely overcome by radical leaders such as Sears,

McDougall, and Lamb. But in Philadelphia the radicals came from every religious persuasion and consciously worked to promote interdenominationalism by including representatives of each ethnic and religious group on the radical committee slates. Out of the shambles of the old assembly party of Galloway and Franklin rose a new popular party. Though often labeled "Presbyterian" by Quakers and Anglicans, who sought thus to discredit it, the new party enjoyed support from laboring men in all congregations except the Quakers. By 1776 it could be said that class identity rather than religious affiliation or an older association with either the proprietary or assembly party was the determining factor in people's political choices.

Two other, closely related, factors promoting greater pressure for internal reform in Philadelphia than in either Boston or New York were the quality and ideology of radical leadership. By the eve of the Revolution, Philadelphia was the home not only of radical native sons such as Matlack, Marshall, and Rittenhouse but also of talented polemicists and organizers such as James Cannon, who had arrived from Edinburgh in 1765; Thomas Paine, who emigrated from England in 1774; and Thomas Young, who came from Boston by way of Newport the following year. In 1767 William Goddard had arrived from New York and begun what soon became the most trenchant vehicle of artisan views in the colonies, the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*. What is more, Philadelphia's radical leaders voiced very different goals from Boston's Samuel Adams. His was to return to the austere Christian commonwealth of the forefathers; theirs was to create a world in which the channels upward were clear, political and economic power was widely shared, and social justice did not give way to the contractual law of a society organized around market relations. Some of Philadelphia's leaders, including Rush and Paine, would later change their views, but in 1775 and 1776 they were at the core of an interdenominational, egalitarian circle that had close ties to the lowest echelons of Philadelphia society.

Finally, the success of Philadelphia's laboring classes was also related to the partial vacuum of political leadership created by the Quakers' withdrawal from positions of power. Violence in politics and the specter of war with England drove many Quakers, who had dominated the assembly party for years, into retirement and sapped conservative Whiggism of much of its strength. One symptom of this retreat was the weakness of the conservative press in Philadelphia, in contrast to the situation in New York, where *Rivington's Gazetteer* continued well

into the war years its offensive against radical attempts to transform politics. This galloping anemia afflicting conservatism was also related to the anxiety evoked by the rising strength of the laboring classes. In no other city did the propertied upper class face such vigorous articulation of the radical point of view or such pressure by artisans and those below them against traditional institutions. Conservative strength ebbed fastest where it was challenged directly by those who had developed their own consciousness and organizational base.

The growth and commercial development of the northern seaport towns brought about the restructuring of social groups, the redistribution of wealth, the alteration of labor relations, the emergence of states of consciousness that cut horizontally through society, and the political mobilization of the lower ranks of laboring people. Many in the cities haltingly recognized that the ligaments of the traditional corporate society had been torn in ways that struck at their opportunities, well-being, and sense of a prevailing equity. From this centurylong process there emerged no perfect crystallization of classes or class consciousness. But both master craftsmen and small retailers in the middle ranks and the artisans, merchant seamen, and laborers below them learned to define their interests and to identify the self-interested behavior in those they had been taught to believe acted for the good of the whole. They began with the issues that most closely affected their daily existence and throughout their struggle developed a consciousness of their separate roles and of their conflicting interests with others in their communities.

On a wide ensemble of issues—including not only political rights but also wages and prices, charity, taxes, market and labor relations, and evangelical religion—the urban lower orders formulated distinctly different points of view from those held by the people above them. There was no unifying ideology among those who worked with their hands or among those who did not, and on several important issues interclass agreement prevailed. Nevertheless, all classes of urban dwellers saw their world changing. As the Revolution approached, these changes led to the rise of a radical consciousness among many and to an interplay between calls for internal reform and insurgency against external forces that adversely affected the lives of city people. Challenges to the concentration of economic, political, and cultural authority ultimately shattered the old system of social relations.

Although no social revolution occurred in America in the 1770s, the American Revolution could not have unfolded when or as it did without the self-conscious action of urban laboring people from the bottom and middle strata who became convinced that they must either create power where none had existed before or watch their position deteriorate, in both absolute and relative terms. Thus the history of the Revolution is in part the history of popular collective action and challenges to the gentry's claim that their rule was legitimized by custom, law, and divine will. Ordinary people, sometimes violently, took over the power and the procedures of the constituted authorities. As wealth became increasingly concentrated, plebeian urban dwellers forced their way into the political arena, not so much through the formal mechanisms of electoral politics as through street demonstrations, mass meetings, extralegal committees that assumed governmental powers, the intimidation of their enemies, and, in some cases, spirited defenses of traditional norms. This reordering of political power required a mental breakthrough, for it challenged a model of social relations, established by the elite, that asserted the superior wisdom and public-mindedness of the educated and wealthy and prescribed deference as the customary and proper role of "inferior" people.

This shattering of the habit of obedience, advanced by the Great Awakening, proceeded far more rapidly in Boston in the second third of the century than in the other port towns. Yet it relapsed there after 1765 as traditional leaders, aided by the British military presence reasserted themselves and as ordinary people closed ranks in a reaffirmation of the spirit of covenant. In New York and Philadelphia the political leadership of the elite was challenged only sporadically until the end of the Seven Years' War, when economic derangements and internal factionalism set the stage for the rise of laboring men to political power. But in all the cities those who labored with their hands, especially those who found it most difficult to weather the changes that had overcome their society, formed a picture of the social arrangements by which they lived. That picture was political in its composition and increasingly vivid in its portrayal of the port towns as places where men struggled against each other rather than working harmoniously for the mutual good of the whole society.

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