Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: The Struggle for Community in Revolutionary Newport

Joshua Fogarty Beatty
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY:
THE STRUGGLE FOR COMMUNITY IN REVOLUTIONARY NEWPORT

A Thesis
Presented To
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
Joshua Beatty
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APPROVAL SHEET

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Author

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Christopher Grasso

James Whittenburg

Philip Daileader
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ABSTRACT

This thesis chronicles the mid-1760s contest over British policy in Newport, Rhode Island. It argues that the Stamp Act crisis in Newport should be viewed as a multilayered struggle in which actors used many different culturally-defined forms of communication, including print, oratory, rituals of celebration and justice, and face-to-face speech, to advance their own goals during a time of uncertainty. By deploying various forms of communication Neworners tried create a community of like-minded people. The use of cultural forms (except for print) was not limited to certain social classes, though class did have a strong influence on actors' general goals. But the printed word offered certain advantages because it could be quickly and accurately transmitted across the colonies; by writing about their own struggle and reading similar news from other cities, the literate elite of Newport were able to envision themselves as part of a larger community that encompassed virtuous persons not just in one town but in many.

The first chapter studies the debate in print between supporters and opponents of Parliamentary actions to tax the colonies and more closely control their commerce. The ideal of a rational argument between anonymous writers quickly devolved into a contest of personal insults and *ad hominem* attacks. When two writers who had supported imperial policy were hung and burned in effigy, the perpetrators attached labels bearing those same slanders on their bodies.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the turbulent week of late August 1765 that encompassed the effigy-hanging, a night of rioting, and a series of other disturbances that together revealed as much social conflict as ideological consensus in Newport. Elite merchants and the common folk came into conflict over their goals even as they worked together, while Crown officers and Stamp Act supporters found themselves opposed to both. After the events, the elite merchants who controlled the printing press were able to spread their version of events to a reading public in a way that others could not.

The third chapter examines the “Stamp Act Notebook” of Ezra Stiles, a Congregational minister in Newport who had a small part in the aftermath of the riot. Between June of 1765 and March of 1767 Stiles feverishly recorded news and information connected to the Stamp Act. The “Notebook” reveals Stiles’s fear of British corruption and his joy over the vigorous colonial resistance; it illuminates his vision of a trans-Atlantic virtuous community based on that resistance; and it describes the petty factions that reemerged in the local community after the crisis had passed.
THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY:

THE STRUGGLE FOR COMMUNITY IN REVOLUTIONARY NEWPORT
INTRODUCTION

The HMS Squirrel sailed into Narragansett Bay on a cool spring morning in 1764. A moderate westerly breeze allowed the sloop to quarter the wind as it sliced northward through the narrow strait between Conanicut Island to the west and Aquidneck Island to the east. The master shouted an order, sailors sprang to ropes and hauled, and the Squirrel smoothly shifted its course eastward, the breeze filling its sails as the sloop gained speed, gliding into Newport harbor towards the wharves and warehouses on the waterfront. The docks, it seemed, were less crowded than on a usual Monday morning; intermittent rain kept the seamen and laborers under cover for as long as they could avoid their overseers. Shopkeepers and artisans looked out from small windows in their decrepit wooden shops along the long stretch of Thames Street, saw the Squirrel and muttered about profits lost. Further up the hill, above the bustle of Thames, wealthy merchants gazed down from their paneled third-floor bedrooms, over the shops and docks below, and made mental notes to invite the Squirrel’s captain for an elegant dinner. With luck he would be born and bred from a genteel English family and would arrive with good manners and welcome news.¹

Indeed, merchants, artisans, and seamen all had reasons for concern. By 1764, Newport was mired in an economic recession. The glorious end of the Seven Years’ War had unexpectedly become the harbinger of despair, marking the end of a brief “golden age”

¹ Meteoro logical information is drawn from Ezra Stiles’ “Meteorological Journals,” book 1, entry for April 23, 1764. The Squirrel arrived that day from Virginia: see the Newport Mercury (Newport, RI), April 23, 1764. The general landscape of Newport is as pictured by Elaine Forman Crane, A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985), 49-52.
of prosperity during which Newport had become the fifth-largest city in British North America and had secured positions as an important post in the triangular slave trade and as a favored resort of elites across the colonies. Newport’s wealth was concentrated among a class of merchant magnates; the city was as hierarchically stratified as were the other urban areas of the Atlantic seaboard. Divided like Boston, Philadelphia, or New York into relative segments of upper, middle, and lower classes as well as an underclass of indentured servants and slaves, Newport’s extremes of wealth and poverty were as great as those seen in any of the cities. Still, the town was built on commerce, not on agriculture or industry, and the necessities of trade, legal and illegal, required wealthy merchants, seamen, skilled artisans, and unskilled laborers to work together. The people of Newport were dependent on each other and on the vagaries of the sea.2

Wealthy merchants, then, would hope to charm the Squirrel’s captain, hoping that fortified by good food and the company of Newport’s young ladies he would be less interested in harassing the town’s shipping. Under the jurisdiction of the new Sugar Act and backed by stiffened vice-admiralty laws, the sloop was assigned to search for smugglers carrying goods to and from foreign countries and their colonies. Further, the officers had a personal stake in being vigilant, for they were allowed to retain a share of any captured goods. While this edict was designed to reduce collusion among crown officers and colonial merchants, those same merchants believed that it would increase corruption going the other way: now the Royal Navy and vice-admiralty judges had incentive to cheat them.

The men who looked out over the town from their great houses in the genteel “Court Square” section of the city, magnates like Godfrey Malbone, William Vernon, and William Ellery, had made their fortunes from expensive slaving voyages and did not depend on smuggling to keep themselves afloat financially. But smaller merchants, other middle-

2. Crane, A Dependent People, 91. Crane’s social history of revolutionary Newport is the foundational source for my description of Newport and the everyday lives of its people.
class professionals, and artisans also directly dipped their hands into the sea of commerce, perhaps buying shares in a trading voyage. These investments were often necessary to supplement incomes that had grown more unstable with the economic depression that had come to Newport with the end of the Seven Years' War. Even those men who did not invest depended on commerce for their welfare. The raw materials and finished goods that circulated through Newport provided employment for men of many different trades in the city—everyone from coopers and riggers to silversmiths and cabinetmakers. Thus, these men also had a direct interest in the imperial policies being enforced by the Squirrel.

But it was the laborers and seamen, the lowest of the free persons of Newport, who would have been most directly affected by the Squirrel's appearance. They, too, were often out of work because of the depression; barely hanging on at the best of times, the current economic upheaval was devastating to them. The common tar or his landlubber cousin might die with only a few items to his name, housed in a rented shack on the edges of the docks or in the poorer outskirts of the town, up past the tanneries on Broadway. And further, the lower sorts were in danger of being pressed into the Royal Navy. While the Squirrel and its sister ships were only empowered to retake deserters from the Navy, high-handed officers in search of manpower might easily overlook law and custom and lift a fishermen from his dory or stage a nighttime raid on a waterfront dive.

3. Many had to rent from their social betters or share living quarters with another poor family. Ezra Stiles in 1775 noted that there were 1,100 houses in Newport—but earlier that year he had estimated (based on a city enumeration) that there were 1,800 families. Clearly many poor families were unable to live in private quarters. See Crane, A Dependent People, 70-71. And conditions were deteriorating in the years leading up to the Stamp Act. In Philadelphia, “most sailors were concentrated at the bottom of the economic ladder of freemen; tax collectors assessed 70 percent of them the minimum tax in 1772.” If conditions in Newport paralleled those in Philadelphia—and Crane believes they may have been even worse—the real wages of seamen in 1764 and 1765 were roughly eighty percent of their 1762 wages. See Billy Smith, “The Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians, 1750–1800,” in Material Life in America, 1600–1860, edited by Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 248-49.

Still, not all the people of Newport would have been put out by the appearance of a ship of the Royal Navy on their shores. A small group, mostly well-bred, some with connections to the patronage system of Great Britain, approved of the hard-line stance that the mother country was taking towards the colonies. The Newport Junto, as the group became known, was disturbed by the corrupt faction-ridden government of Rhode Island and saw a forceful Parliament as a far more legitimate authority—indeed, they were preparing a petition to Parliament asking to have the colony’s charter revoked. And illicit commerce, they believed, was eating away at the colony’s prosperity. The Junto’s intellectual leaders—the lawyer Martin Howard, Jr. (one of the colony’s representatives at the Albany Congress of 1754) and the Scottish physician Thomas Moffatt—would over the next year write a series of provocative pseudonymous letters to the Newport Mercury. The first appeared on that fateful day when the Squirrel cruised into the harbor. In addition, Howard would pen a pamphlet that became the centerpiece of perhaps the most fiery war of words of the early Revolutionary period, sparking responses from Rhode Island’s governor Stephen Hopkins and from Boston firebrand James Otis, Jr.5

Newporters also opposed the writings of the Junto and the imperial policies they supported. A second group rose from the elite of Newport’s hierarchical society. A small group of wealthy merchants, in contact with similar bands in Boston and elsewhere, would begin by August of 1765 to organize opposition to the Stamp Act, which had become a flashpoint of resistance to British policy. These forerunners to the Sons of Liberty would enlist the laboring classes to help them demonstrate publicly against the Stamp Act and its supporters.6


Thus, tensions in Newport's maritime community would continue to grow through 1764 and 1765. During that time, the *Squirrel* and its sister ships in the Royal Navy continued to patrol Narragansett Bay, trying to enforce the Sugar Act of 1764 and customs regulations. When word arrived in early 1765 that the Stamp Act—long rumored to be in the works—had been passed, the uproar in the colonies redoubled. The new tax affected all aspects of colonial life, for embossed papers (at a cost) were now required for all court documents, land titles, contracts, playing cards, newspapers, and other printed items. Pamphlet wars between supporters and opponents of the new legislation sprang up in New England and elsewhere. That spring and summer, continued economic stress and the impressment policies of the Royal Navy combined to fuel a severe riot in Rhode Island even as the local *Newport Mercury* published an inaccurate version of Virginia's Stamp Act Resolves that labeled defenders of the Act as enemies to their country. In Boston and then in Newport, the debates of literate elites and the frustrations of the working class would come together in a series of riots directed at defenders of the Stamp Act and royal officials.

The story of the Stamp Act Crisis in Newport is one of cultural forms as played out in the landscape of the town—a physical and cultural landscape that would not have been visible to the captain of the *Squirrel* as he sailed into the harbor, even if he had known what to look for. During the Stamp Act Crisis, the people of Newport—merchants and laborers, opponents and defenders of imperial policies—deployed the cultural forms of print, public demonstration, oration, and face-to-face communication in the effort to advance their own interests. Their actions largely took place in one small area of Newport, no more than a quarter mile long and half that in breadth, centered around the open area of the Parade below the Colony House. This space contained Martin Howard Jr.'s house, attacked during...
the riot, and the printing office of Samuel Hall where Howard’s pamphlets and the Junto’s letters to the *Newport Mercury* were edited and produced. It held the market houses where so much of the daily, face-to-face communication among Newporters took place; it also held Queen Street, site of the particular encounter between Collector of Customs John Robinson and the angry townsman Samuel Crandall. Finally, the area contained two important public places: the Swing-bridge, where unknown persons posted warnings to Stamp Master Augustus Johnston, and the official public sites of the Colony House and the Parade, where effigies of Johnston, Howard, and Thomas Moffatt were hanged and burned and where Congregational minister Ezra Stiles contested the validity of Johnston’s resignation before the gathered crowd (see the map of Newport on p.20).

*  
  *  

This approach to the study of the Newport riot, concentrating on the cultural forms of the events during and surrounding the riot, intersects with and expands on two strands of historiography. The first is the scholarship on riots and rioting in revolutionary America; the second is the diverse set of writings on the cultural history of communication and community.

In 1955, Edmund Morgan and Helen Morgan published *The Stamp Act Crisis*, in which they argued that the riots of August 1765 in Boston, Newport, and elsewhere were rational responses to the British imperial policies of the Stamp Act and Sugar Act. “What the colonists had to say,” the Morgans wrote, “about Parliamentary power and about their own rights deserved to be taken seriously.”7 The Morgans concentrated on the elites who battled for and against the Stamp Act. In their reading, the riots in Newport and elsewhere “transformed the debate over Parliamentary authority into a test of Parliamentary

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power...[and challenged] the ability of Parliament to enforce the authority it claimed."

In a thorough presentation of the available evidence, the Morgans analyzed virtually all the events in Newport in 1764 and 1765 that are discussed here. They examined the "O.Z." letters, the pamphlet war among Martin Howard, Jr., Stephen Hopkins, and James Otis Jr., the effigy-hanging, the riot, and the actions of citizens such as Samuel Crandall, John Webber, and Ezra Stiles in the days that followed. Yet their goal was to show that the colonies were unified against the Stamp Act by a set of rational beliefs. Thus, the Morgans examined events thematically rather than chronologically; as a result, the riot and Samuel Crandall's demands on John Robinson are discussed on pp. 150-155, while John Webber's threats to level the town, which were taking place simultaneously, are left until a discussion of the Sons of Liberty on pp. 199-201. The Morgans' narrative structure, as an examination of rational resistance across the colonies, therefore tended to hide the uncertainty and chaos that are revealed by a close study of localized events.

The Morgans were particularly interested in the ideas deployed during the Stamp Act crisis, but subsequent historians have focused more particularly on the crowd actions of the period. These studies were inspired by the scholarship of the European historian George Rudé, who accorded crowds the qualities of reason and purpose. For Rudé, riots were always reasoned, disciplined, and (relative to their potential for violence) nondestructive. Crowd actions therefore can be read as messages sent to victims and observers. The trick for the historian studying a particular mob, then, is to figure out who was speaking and what they were saying. Riots, in sum, can be seen as a form of communication; by studying crowd actions we can read the thoughts of portions of the populace who did not otherwise leave their voices in the historical record.

8. Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 150.

9. Two of Rudé's numerous works on crowd action are The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) and Ideology and Popular Protest (New York: Pantheon, 1980). Rudé uses the term "crowd" to describe the sometimes violent groups that he studies.
Thomas Slaughter has argued that historians of crowd action in the Revolutionary period can be categorized as either "consensus" or "conflict" scholars. The consensus historians, including Gordon Wood, Pauline Maier, and Bernard Bailyn, focused their attention on riots that attacked property rather than people and that did not challenge existing local institutions. These mobs were generally led by (or at least tolerated by) those local officials responsible for maintaining public order. Consensus historians' mobs characteristically had specific goals, did not attack property haphazardly, and were made up of a diverse cross-section of the local community. In her examination of the period, Maier tried to show that the Newport riot was part of this extralegal tradition. As unruly as the riot may have seemed, it was actually a way of enforcing community desires when legal measures had failed—in this case, removing Howard and Moffatt from the community and forcing Augustus Johnston to resign the office of Stamp Master. Thus, the riots were driven from the top down. Crowds acted in accordance with traditional patterns of deference to local leaders; when they rioted against the Stamp Act, they were following the lead of the elite merchants who were acting in their roles of community leaders.

However—following the lead of most of the authors I review and deferring to my own private opinions about the (often justified) aggressiveness and violence of historical actors—I have used the terms "mob," "crowd," and "riot" without regard to the group's intent.


The conflict historians, including Gary Nash, Jesse Lemisch, and Dirk Hoerder, argued that the consensus model does not represent a typical riot of the eighteenth century. Vast differences in local conditions preclude such generalization. Mobs for the conflict historians were sparked by the growth of a “socially, economically, ethnically, and politically fissured society.” Many Revolutionary riots, including those sparked by the merchant seamen of New York City and probably those sparked by Newport’s as well, were defined by differences between interests and classes and therefore cannot be explained by the consensus model. Nash took this bottom-up perspective in examining popular unrest in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. He argued that the riots of the Stamp Act period were representative of popular unrest rooted in the economic upheaval of the post-Seven Years’ War period. Thus, riots were directed as much at a local elite—visible representatives and beneficiaries of increased social stratification—as they were at the imperial policies which were their ostensible target.

In 1989, Sheila Skemp applied Nash’s model specifically to the Newport riot. She argued that “constitutional issues alone were not responsible for the activities of the crowd.” Instead, the crowd was responding to “their [economic] suffering during and immediately after the Seven Years’ War, their fears of impressment, and their insensitive treatment at the hands of men in the colony who consistently supported British policy.” These grievances, according to Skemp, account for one of the most puzzling aspects of the crisis in Newport: the continuing unrest in the town after the initial, well-planned, disciplined riot of the 28th.


The elite merchants, she argued, could no longer control the crowd because the crowd had different goals than did the merchants. The merchants had achieved their goals by removing Howard and Moffatt and, most importantly, achieving Johnston’s resignation; the crowd still looked for economic relief and social justice.14

While drawing on many aspects of their analyses, the present thesis differs from both the conflict and consensus positions. Unlike the work of the conflict historians, it concentrates not on the social origins and economic grievances of the different classes involved, but on the cultural forms that different persons and groups employed in their quests to enact their goals. These cultural forms were not used exclusively by one or another social class: elite merchants created and participated in the effigy-hanging and the riot, traditionally lower-class forms of expressing grievances, while mob leader John Webber was able to negotiate face-to-face with his supposed betters in the community, and indeed temporarily to get the best of them. However, the elites controlled the printing press in Newport, an advantage that would allow them to determine the content and the tone of what would be told to the wider world.

If this thesis complicates the work of the conflict historians by arguing that pre-existing class differences do not explain specific behaviors (while still acknowledging the connection between socioeconomic status and generalized motives), it also complicates the work of the consensus historians. This thesis argues that it is the process by which groups attempted to create a consensus that deserves the most attention, rather than the a priori assumption that consensus could be achieved through the simple perception of a rational argument as delivered through the medium of a newspaper letter or a pamphlet debate.

14. Sheila Skemp, “Newport’s Stamp Act Rioters: Another Look,” Rhode Island History 47, no. 2 (May 1989): 41-59, quoted 41, 42. A recent attack on Skemp’s article can be dismissed through lack of evidence. Though stridently arguing that “the members of the Newport mob rioted only because an elite group coerced them to action” and in no way because of their own grievances, the author has failed to examine any of the records from the Public Record Office in London (or the transcripts at the Library of Congress) that serve as the basis for Morgan, Maier, and Skemp’s arguments. See Allen Mansfield Thomas, “Circumstances not Principles: Elite Control of the Newport Stamp Act Riots,” Newport History, Winter 1996, 128-43.
Print, public rituals, and oratory were all methods by which different persons attempted to create a consensus in the community. Sometimes they were successful, as with the effigy-hanging that solidified feeling against the Stamp Act supporters. But other times they exposed unexpected rifts, as when the elite merchants’ attempt to silence John Webber by forcing him on board the HMS *Cygnet* resulted in the crowd threatening to riot in protest—a community-building measure of their own, reflecting not a nascent class consciousness (as the conflict historians would argue) but the protection of the moral economy that was now threatened by the elite merchants as it had been by the Stamp Act supporters.

To examine the many performative forms deployed by Newporters in 1764 and 1765, it is useful to draw upon a second historiography—the cultural history of community and performance. The participants in the events surrounding the riot had to transmit their ideas to a broad audience and achieve a consensus, an unspoken but agreed-upon judgment of what was right. The scholarship engaging this form of community-building has been strongly influenced by the English translation of Jürgen Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Writing in 1962, Habermas argued that in early-eighteenth-century England (and slightly later across Europe) there arose “within the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy” a bourgeois public sphere, or a realm between politics and private life “in which state authority was publicly monitored though informed and critical discourse by the people” as a replacement for “a public sphere in which the ruler’s power was merely represented before the people.” This “informed and critical discourse” was driven by the development of print technology; it was within the world of print (in newspapers and pamphlets) as well as in face-to-face communication (in clubs and salons) that the public sphere developed.15

Published in 1989, the translation of Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere quickly led to a series of studies that examined the construction of the “public sphere” in early America. Michael Warner, in his book Letters of the Republic, applied Jurgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere to colonial America. Warner argued that in the 1720s and 1730s republicanism and print culture arose simultaneously in British North America. The public sphere that developed was, again, part of neither the state nor civil society and thus could watch over both. It was inextricably tied to the rise of new ways and places to communicate: “newspapers, literary salons, coffeehouses, novels, art criticism, and magazines.”

According to Warner, the public sphere in America existed largely on the basis of three “norms”: supervision, negativity, and controversy. Supervision refers to an implicit expectation “that proceedings be made public.” The new cultural matrix created a recognition that a printed text can be read by an infinite number of unknowable others—and furthermore, this public understood that, as members of a “republic of letters,” they had an obligation to act as judges of the debate. The second norm, negativity, was arguably the most powerful. The writer was personally removed from the writing and thereby associated with the practice of virtue. Authors used fictional personae to disguise their identities and create a facade of rational disinterest. Third is the norm of controversy, the paradoxical fact that the consensual rhetoric of antiparty writing actually provided the categories that allow debate to take place at all. The norm of controversy “silently transforms

16. Michael Warner, The Letters of the Republic Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), x. The difference between Warner’s model and Habermas’ is that Warner rejected Habermas’ implicit “technodeterministic” position. For the German philosopher and for later scholars of print the public sphere arose out of developments in publication technology in the late seventeenth century. Warner, in contrast, denied the primacy of print technology. He instead argued that republicanism and print culture arose simultaneously, creating and being created by each other. In short, Habermas saw a Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Warner identified a cultural transformation. Since the distinction is over the creation of the public sphere and not its effects, it fortunately does not come into play in this work—both authors would agree that by the 1760s the public sphere was firmly in existence in the colonies.

The ideal of a social order free from conflictual debate into an ideal of debate free of social conflict.\textsuperscript{18}

The public sphere of Warner and Habermas is a \textit{bourgeois} public sphere, one constructed through print and thus practically (if not theoretically) limited to a certain class of persons. Since the publication of their works, several authors have tried to extend the reach of the public sphere to lower-status groups by emphasizing practices of public communication and community-formation other than print. David Waldstreicher's \textit{In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes}, asked how non-elites participated in the making of a national culture. Waldstreicher argued that parades, toasts, and other performative rites—the "perpetual fetes" of the title—were essential in the creation of American nationalism. Nationalism, for Waldstreicher, was best seen not as an ideology but as a process—it is continually created through media such as print and public ritual. "During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries," he wrote, "newspapers transformed the very rituals that they might seem to merely describe."\textsuperscript{19} Print provided an extralocal context for local practices, tying the individual and the community to the nation. Thus, in revolutionary America, a nascent nationalist ideology "papered over" the class divisions "that had energized much of the population in the first place."\textsuperscript{20}

Other authors have concentrated not on formalized rituals of parades and toasting, but on more plebeian activities—"rough music" and skimmingtofn, effigy-hangings and house attacks, communal singing and directed violence. Peter Shaw, Robert Blair St. George, and William Pencak have examined these traditions of crowd activity by drawing on the scholarship of George Rudé, E.P. Thompson, Elias Cannetti, and others. Assuming like

\textsuperscript{18} Warner, \textit{Letters of the Republic}, 46.


\textsuperscript{20} Waldstreicher, "\textit{Perpetual Fetes}", 18.
Rudé and the historians of crowd action that violent rituals are forms of communication and community-building, these historians see these rituals as deriving from context of European vernacular traditions. In both Europe and America the forms served as vessels of class conflict. Their work, especially St. George and Pencak's, can be considered to extend the “conflict” view of revolutionary crowd action into the realm of cultural history.  

Despite the press given to print culture over the last decade, the colonial period was still one in which auditory communication played an essential role. In “Eloquence is Power”, Sandra Gustafson argued that, by the mid-eighteenth century, print and speech were enmeshed in a “performance semiotic” in which the two were defined against each other. “Preachers and political orators signified unmediated access to truth in extemporaneous speeches, or they dramatized the stability of their spiritual or political intent by reading from a manuscript or referring to foundational documents.”  

Above all others, face-to-face personal interactions were still the primary way in which colonists communicated. In Knowledge is Power, Richard D. Brown argued that in the colonial period, information became more abundant, more specialized, and more impersonal. A colonial lawyer or Virginia planter at the turn of the eighteenth century might have owned more books than any public institution, but he still received most of his news from face-to-face interactions with other people. Newspapers would not become essential sources of current information until during and after the Revolution; their function was instead to record for posterity texts such as speeches and sermons. They were reference


sources rather than a quick and vital method of disseminating public events.\textsuperscript{23}

Reexamining the literature eleven years after Brown wrote \textit{Knowledge is Power}, and thus incorporating the work of Warner, Waldstreicher, and a decade’s worth of cultural history, Robert Gross came to a similar conclusion. “Americans in the early republic still inhabited a small-scale, face-to-face society, even in port cities like Philadelphia and New York,” wrote Gross, “and they were faithful to personalized norms. Print, like all institutions, adapted to the dominant ethos. Far from acting as an agent in its own right, ushering in a brave new world, it was integrated into a largely verbal culture. Well into the nineteenth century, the media age remained a distant future.”\textsuperscript{24} This thesis concurs with Gross’s interpretation. In that spirit, it tries to knit together the various forms of communication as explicated in these detailed, individual studies into a cultural history of the Stamp Act crisis in Newport.

* *

These forms of communication were used in the service of the \textit{virtuous community}. The virtuous community was not a physical entity; instead, it was an “imagined community,” to borrow, once again, Benedict Anderson’s over-used term. However, the virtuous community was not a nation. Nations, for Anderson, have four qualities: they are \textit{imagined, limited, sovereign} and a \textit{community}. The virtuous community only possessed two of these. Like the supervisory public in Warner’s norms of the public sphere, the virtuous community was \textit{imagined} “because the members…will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” And it was a \textit{community}, “because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, [it] is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” Yet, unlike a nation, the


\textsuperscript{24} Robert A. Gross, “Print and the Public Sphere in Early America,” paper presented to the Omohundro Institute of History and Culture (Williamsburg, Va., 2000), 4.
virtuous community was not *sovereign*: it did not itself claim to be a state. And, thus, it was not *limited*, because lacking statehood it also lacked physical boundaries.  

The virtuous community was a historical construction based on eighteenth-century notions of virtue, liberty, power, and corruption, continually being created through a process of struggle and resistance. The members of physical communities like Newport by the mid-1760s “saw about them, with increasing clarity, not merely mistaken, or even evil, policies violating the principles upon which freedom rested, but what appeared to be evidence of nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty both in England and America.” These persons banded together within these towns to fight corruption—in Newport, they were represented by the wealthy merchants Samuel Vernon, William Ellery, and Robert Crook as well as the others who would in later years call themselves Sons of Liberty. Within the city, face-to-face interactions and ritual performances enacted at actual places in the landscape served to create an understanding among the local group of resistors. But the virtuous community was created through reading in print about similar protesters across the colonies and by writing about one’s own struggles using the same medium. The virtuous community, therefore, consisted of persons situated in the several colonies and even across the Atlantic who envisioned themselves as allies bound together in a desperate fight to resist the ministerial corruption of postwar Britain as it encroached on the colonies, particularly in the forms of the Sugar and Stamp Acts. And helping it imagine itself as a community was the mechanism of print.

Chapter 1, then, examines the buildup to the Stamp Act riot of August, 1765. The economically beleaguered seamen and laborers of Newport were becoming restless; simultaneously, a fierce pamphlet war in the public sphere developed between the supporters and opponents of the recent British tax measures. The debate over local politics and imperial

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policies illustrates how conversation in the public sphere of print actually worked. In contrast to the ideal of rational, dispassionate discourse, the Junto's letters to the *Newport Mercury* and the pamphlet war that followed demonstrate a pattern in which increasing social conflict led to the deterioration of the norms of the bourgeois public sphere. During this battle, the persons who believed themselves fighters against corruption began through exclusion to define themselves more rigidly: they rejected certain arguments and, then, the authors of those arguments.

The second chapter views the riot and its aftermath through the lens of cultural history. Unlike the first chapter, which is largely an examination of the print public sphere as it operated in one specific situation, the second chapter takes a close look at print, ritualized performance, violent attacks on property, oratory, and face-to-face communication as they were deployed by different persons and factions during a single turbulent week. By examining the riot and its aftermath with an emphasis on the cultural forms of communication and community-building, the complex interactions between persons and factions are revealed. The faction that came out on top—achieving their goals and writing the history of the event—would be that of the elite merchants, the core of the local resistance to the Stamp Act. Their command of the technology of print in Newport, cemented during the spring and summer, allowed them to spread their version of events to the rest of the colonies and across the Atlantic.

Chapter 3 is an extended analysis of a single document. The minister of Newport’s Second Congregational Church, Ezra Stiles, described many of the events of the mid-1760s in his “Stamp Act Notebook.” The first two chapters foreground materialist, economic rationales for the events of 1764 and 1765 and concentrate on showing how those events played out through particular cultural forms. They present a cynical view of the protests against the Stamp Act, painting a picture of the elite merchants who drove the resistance as self-interested and anything but virtuous. But Stiles’ “Stamp Act Notebook” reveals just how
very seriously at least one colonist took the ideas circulating behind the reactions to imperial measures. Stiles was devoted to the virtuous community; he drew up a history of imperial oppression of the colonies (which he imagined as engraved, visible to all, on a giant stone monument), calculated how many fighting men the colonies could produce, made lists of the persons across the colonies who supported and opposed the Stamp Act, and carefully described the repeal celebrations in 1766 and the repeal anniversary celebrations in 1767. In short, Stiles saw himself as participating in a transatlantic virtuous community whose members communicated in print and through letters and celebrated their liberty through ritual performances—which were then transmitted to other members of the community through print. And Stiles' attention to geography and demography suggest that he was beginning to imagine the virtuous community as synonymous with the American continent—a first step towards conceiving of America as a nation. However, his description of the wrangling among Newport's Sons of Liberty in planning the repeal anniversary celebrations in 1767 calls into question the extent to which the local chapter of the virtuous community held together beyond the periods of immediate crisis, such as the last week of August, 1765.
FIGURE 1

Map of Newport by Charles Blaskowitz (1777)

Reference: Myron O. Stachiw, ed., The Early Architectures and Landscapes of the Narragansett Basin, Volume 1: Newport (Newport, RI: Vernacular Architecture Forum, 2001), 8. The map has been modified by the author to illustrate sites discussed in the text.
CHAPTER 1

"NO COMPLIMENT, AT THE EXPENSE OF TRUTH":

THE STRUGGLE IN THE PRESS

In the taverns and coffeehouses of the bustling colonial port of Newport, rumors spread quickly by word-of-mouth; well-cultivated personal and business relationships acted as vectors for the spread of news. But newspapers were readily available, and the latest weekly issue presented a codified version of the news that would be read by persons across the city and colony. Newspapers also published letters, usually under pseudonyms, that served as opinionated commentary on current events and that in their turn sparked more comment and debate among the public. The letter by “Z.Y.” that Samuel Hall printed in his Newport Mercury on April 23, 1764 must have excited more than comment—it must have fostered much anger and resentment among its readers in Rhode Island’s colonial capital. For the vituperous letter was a direct assault on the charter of Rhode Island, the document that allowed the smallest of Britain’s mainland colonies largely unrestricted control over its own affairs.

It was to be the first of many letters written by members of the Newport Junto, and the first salvo in a war of words that developed in the context of rising imperial conflict and growing social tensions in Rhode Island. This conflict simmered and would eventually be published for all to see in a vicious pamphlet war that turned very personal. That war of words began under the rules of polite newspaper discourse, but by its end the rules had been shattered.
The public sphere created by newspapers in eighteenth-century America is held to have operated on several unspoken assumptions: first, that print discourse was conducted by virtuous, disinterested men who hid their identities behind pseudonyms; second, that print discourse was conducted in a vacuum, free of any social conflicts; and third, that there existed a broad public that diligently followed and rationally judged the debate. Though these may have been the ideals, in practice things did not work nearly so neatly. This chapter examines the breakdown of rational public discourse in Newport during the Stamp Act Crisis. It argues that disinterested debate failed because social conflict was at the heart of the matter—in this case, the social and imperial tensions rising out of the economic depression at the end of the Seven Years’ War. Once participants acknowledged that principled positions were inextricably tied to factional interest, authors tried to promote their own virtue by assaulting their opponents' with steadily more direct personal attacks. Finally, when the loyalist authors were hung in effigy in late August, 1765, their effigies were decorated with scandalous labels taken from the writings that attacked them. The public, supposedly disinterested judges of rational discourse, were in the end asked to choose not between constitutional arguments but between helpless effigies and virtuous town leaders.

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The first letter from the Newport Junto made its appearance in the Newport Mercury on April 23, 1764. Purportedly penned by “Z.Y.”, it was an attack on the Rhode Island charter as giving too much power to the people—that “stupid herd of voters”—and too little to the Crown. The authors decried the parties, or factions, of the colony’s politics, for only being concerned with their own interest. The charter, they argued, was no defense

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against an “arbitrary Prince”, for an arbitrary prince would need no excuse to impose his will
and would let no charter stop him.2

In July of that year, the Mercury printed a piece from another colony, written by “A
Lover of Pennsylvania.” “Lover” was concerned that Pennsylvania relied too much on
British imported goods, and strongly advised that the colony turn towards its manufactures
to reduce the crippling load of taxes imposed by Great Britain and the concomitant
reduction in commerce. Accompanying this piece was a note authored by “A Friend to
RHODE-ISLAND” (almost certainly a Junto member). This note strongly praised “Lover’s”
effort and suggested that Rhode Islanders would do well to follow his directions and
introduce woolen and linen manufactures into the colony. “Let your wives and daughters
spin; your sons become weavers and clothiers, and not sailors, as navigation must now be
laid aside,” invoked “A Friend.” This theme—the promotion of industry over
commerce—would become common in the Junto’s writings.3

“A Friend’s” abjuration of Newport’s mercantile roots, driven by the labor of
merchant seamen, would no doubt have excited dissent among the city’s population at any
time. But, moreover, it was printed in a period of great tension. Three days before, sailors
from the HMS St. John had tried to impress merchant seamen working on a vessel in
Newport harbor. These Royal Navy sailors were already less than favorites among
Newporters, having been “guilty, several Days before, of some Irregularities in town.” A
skirmish ensued, leaving both groups bruised, the seamen free, and the sailors’ commanding
officer, somewhat embarrassingly, in the hands of the civilians. The Mercury reported, “This
Transaction, with the Men, who had been guilty of the Disorders, being detained on board
the Schooners after they had been demanded by Authority, greatly incensed the People of
the Town.” The St. John tried to escape from the harbor before authorities—or a

2. Newport Mercury (Newport, RI), April 23, 1764.
mob—could come aboard and apprehend the accused sailors. Beating into the wind, she was hailed by the fort on the southern side of the harbor, disregarded instructions to turn back, and was fired upon “8 or 10” times. The Newport gunners, who likely were out of practice, did no more than scare the sailors.4

Though the Pennsylvania letter was probably sent in by a member of the Junto, the first letter under group members’ most infamous pseudonym—“O.Z.”—appeared on August 20, 1764. It was not a long piece, but it extolled the virtues of manufactures for the colony, concentrating on fabrics—wool and linen especially. “Every Thing made or manufactured within the Colony, should now be encouraged...if spun and knit from the Wool of the Colony, [clothing] should be considered and esteemed as Marks of Patriotism, both in the Maker and Wearer, of either sex.” The authors concluded by suggesting that they would soon explore the subject as it pertained to Rhode Island “at more Leisure, and in a very different Manner.”5

In the next issue O.Z. revealed the “different Manner” in which he planned to proceed—by exploring, in exhausting detail, the steps in the growth and manufacture of hemp. This was followed by a falsely modest denial of any talent as a “Bookworm, [or] Scribbler” and a sarcastic statement dismissing the merits of many of Newport’s people: “I know and respect all the Street-brawlers, Corner-railers, and Shop-snarlers, of Newport; a worthy, laudable Tribe.... ...[who] may be classed upon the same Form as the Goldfinders or Scavengers of London. And may Health and Unity be amongst them all; a Wish seldom sincere, either from the Lawyer or the Physician.”6


5. *Newport Mercury*, August 20, 1764.

Already the Junto’s members were playing with the rules of the public sphere, hinting at their own identities. The phrase “the Lawyer or the Physician” pointed towards the Junto’s resident men of law and medicine, Martin Howard Jr. and Dr. Thomas Moffatt. It is likely that the O.Z. letters were a joint project between the two. As the authors grew more playful over the next few months, hints as to the internal workings of the Junto would become commonplace.

For the next several weeks the O.Z. letters were largely devoted to the cultivation of hemp. It was a subject that the authors skillfully tied to other issues in the colony in a manner calculated to infuriate readers who were already angry about the imposition of the Sugar Act and the sudden enforcement of anti-smuggling measures. Rhode Islanders, they suggested, should be grateful to the mother country because “at the same time Molasses is reduced to Three Pence per Gallon Duty, a Bounty of £8 Sterling is granted for Hemp raised in the Colonies.” This attack and those in the weeks to come may have been issued as playful responses to Stephen Hopkins, Governor of Rhode Island and budding republican, who had penned a thinly veiled, pseudonymous invective against the Newport Junto in the Providence Gazette.7

A significant portion of Hopkins’ outburst in the Gazette was a response to the rumors that the Junto, frustrated with the corruption of Rhode Island party politics, were preparing to petition Parliament for the revocation of the colonial charter and the imposition of royal government on the colony. Such a idea, of course, did not sit well with Rhode Island’s mercantile or political elite; the free hand they currently had in running the colony and practicing free (if illegal) trade would be severely curtailed. The rumors would prove to be true, as the Junto would send a petition the next month; though nothing came of it, the petition served to heighten the fears of Newport’s elite and further make Howard and

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7. Newport Mercury, September 17, 1764; Providence Gazette (Providence, RI), September 15, 1764.
Moffatt special targets of persecution.8

A week after Hopkins’ invective appeared, O.Z. attacked Rhode Islanders even more directly. Calling them the tribe of “Wrong Heads,” “a distinct, peculiar people,” O.Z. returned again to the themes of trade and manufactures. “They are passionately fond of Rum, Sugar, and Molasses; but grow instantly Sick at the Thought of Hemp, Flax, and many other Plants.” The growing of hemp—or the taking up of any other manufacture—would divert the “lazy and unemployed” people of the colony and prevent them from becoming “Beggars and Thieves.”9 At this time, attacks on Rhode Islanders continued to be directed at the community in general and not at specific individuals.10 This was allowable under the conventions of the public sphere because it still suggested the principle that the community as a whole stood to benefit or lose by O.Z.’s suggestions. Factions, here, were irrelevant.

Samuel Hall, publisher of the Newport Mercury, found accompanying the O.Z. letter he published on September 24, 1764 a set of short, pointed “Queries,” almost certainly the work of the Junto. The Mercury had already published a set of these—ostensibly by the Bishop of Cloyne—in installments earlier in the year. Like the O.Z. letters, they took as their main theme the necessity of manufacture and the lessening of reliance on trade. The eighteen published in the October 1 issue of the Mercury were surely read as direct attacks on the maritime community of Newport. One described the politics of Rhode Island as a “Burlesque upon Trifles,” and another asked “What Sea-Ports and foreign Trade have the


10. For an analysis of O.Z.’s attacks against the trade-fueled ambitions of Newport’s middle and lower classes, see Sheila Skemp, “Newport’s Stamp Act Rioters: Another Look,” Rhode Island History 47, no. 2 (May 1989): 58. Skemp argues persuasively that the Junto’s attacks on the charter and on the citizens’ ambitions and capacity partially fueled the non-elite participation in the Stamp Act riot as directed at Howard and Moffatt; however, according to Skemp’s evidence (58, n.68-71), the written assaults on these groups petered out after November, 1764, leaving it difficult to directly implicate these writings in an attack that happened nine months later.
Swiss? and yet how warm are those People and how well provided?" Most damaging perhaps, a third asked "Whether there may not be found a People, who so contrive as to be impoverished by their Trade? And whether we are that People?"\textsuperscript{11}

In the letter of October 1, O.Z. again made a connection between Rhode Island's obsession with trade and another issue—in this case, the larger question of Parliament's right to tax the colonies. O.Z. recorded a conversation (presumably fictional) with another Junto member, putting words into his compatriot's mouth: "The People of this Colony...their darling passion is Trade, and they have a Genius so amazingly adapted to it that, without any Capital, they could in a few Years acquire Fortunes if it were not for these oppressive Acts of Parliament." His rant continued against the Rhode Island assembly, who had recently authorized £9000 to build a new court house in a "petty County, scarce large enough for a Gentleman's Park," when the other Junto members hushed him, saying "such Opinions did not cleverly square with our Plan."\textsuperscript{12}

The more whiggish of the Mercury's readers were undoubtedly grateful for the next three weeks, for they brought a respite from O.Z.'s letters. Tragically, the reason probably was not that the Junto was weary of extolling the benefits of hemp, but that Martin Howard, Jr.'s wife Anne had died on September 23. But the 22nd of October brought a letter by O.Z. promising to turn his attention from hemp to wool. And the next week, true to form, brought a missive extolling the virtues of industry and home manufacture—this time pontificating on Rhode Island as a colony that by climate and soil was well placed for raising

\textsuperscript{11} For previous Queries, see the Newport Mercury, August 20 and 27, 1764. The Bishop of Cloyne from 1734 to his death in 1753 was Bishop Berkeley, who had lived in Newport for several years in the 1720s and 1730s and had been Thomas Moffatt's sponsor and patron. Perhaps the identity of "the Bishop of Cloyne" was taken up by the Junto as a representation of disinterested—and Anglican—authority that would be recognized instantly by all of Rhode Island's literate elite.

The italics in the third query here are as printed.

\textsuperscript{12} Newport Mercury, October 1, 1764.
sheep. As it was with hemp, O.Z.'s reason for promoting the production of wool for home use was "the happiness and prosperity of the colonies." 13

The Junto writers were aware that not only were there many who did not agree with their plans or their politics, but some of those were beginning to respond. O.Z. claimed to be prepared for "the reproaches of some, and the malevolent criticisms of others," and would withstand the assaults of those who preached a "counterfeit patriotism... swaggering about the rights of the colonies." Clearly, the outside world was beginning to encroach upon the Newport Junto. Social conflict was beginning to appear in the context of the letters, and the Junto acknowledged that there were those who thought differently about politics and production. Since the Junto's letters had not been directly answered in either the Mercury or the Providence Gazette, the debate must have been taking place in other arenas—most likely the face-to-face negotiations of coffeehouse, marketplace, and parlor. 14

There would be three more weeks of letters on wool, but then O.Z. abruptly ceased writing to the Mercury. He was not halted by threats of force—not yet—but only put down his pen so that a distinguished gentleman from Halifax could pick it up. For in December of 1764 Stephen Hopkins, Governor of Rhode Island, finished writing a pamphlet that was quickly distributed through the colonies. Entitled The Rights of Colonies Examined, it was published with the endorsement of the Rhode Island assembly. Hopkins expanded upon an article he had written earlier that year for the Providence Gazette called "An Essay on the Trade of the Northern Colonies." 15

Though raising the constitutional issues that would be heard across the colonies in years to come, Hopkins also brought up two topics of particular importance to Rhode

13. Newport Mercury, October 22 and 29, 1764; on Anne Howard's death, see October 1, 1764.
Island. First, he illustrated the supposed ill effects of the new tax on foreign molasses. The tax, he argued, would affect Rhode Island unfairly, since that colony’s trade “depended much more on foreign molasses and distilleries than any other.” It was in effect a prohibition of trade with the French and Dutch sugar colonies, a prohibition that could not have any benefit for the British sugar colonies since they had no need for all the “lumber, horses, flour, and fish” that the Northern colonies now exported to foreign islands in return for molasses. Even if the trade continued, the tax of three pence per gallon would impoverish Rhode Islanders. Hopkins estimated that the tax would come to £14,375, “to be paid yearly by this little colony, a larger sum than ever was in it at any one time.” Either way—whether by the cessation of trade or the payment of taxes—Rhode Island lost. Here Hopkins clearly delineated the conflicts between Rhode Island’s interests and the effects of the new policies. Though Hopkins tried to show that policies beneficial for the colony would also be good for Britain, his arguments inadvertently highlighted the differences in opinion between supporters and opponents of the imperial statutes.16

Second, Hopkins protested the portion of the act “enlarging the power and jurisdiction of the courts of vice-admiralty in the colonies.” Previously, vice-admiralty courts were established in many colonies, but the new laws erected a vice-admiralty court for the colonies in Halifax—far from the rest of the mainland ports. Forcing a merchant from Georgia—or Rhode Island, for that matter—to travel to Halifax would impose a prohibitive and unreasonable expense. Even worse, it forced the dependent to make his case in an unwelcoming setting, far from friends. Even in the best case scenario—his acquittal—the merchant received no damages as long as the judge certified that there had been probable cause for the seizure. All this, Hopkins suggested, added up to potential for the economic ruin of honest merchants. Interestingly, Hopkins did not even consider the penalties if a

That piece of wishful thinking was one of many exploded by Martin Howard, Jr. in his reply to Hopkins. Entitled *A Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax, to His Friend in Rhode-Island*, the residence of its supposed author was a clear allusion to the seat of the new vice-admiralty court. The constitutional arguments Howard laid out would become standard Tory rhetoric for the next decade. He denied that the colonists had a right to representation in Parliament—the personal rights that came with being a British citizen were not the same as the political rights that permitted some and not others to have direct representation; the colonies’ charters expressly denied them those rights. Parliament, similarly, had through the common law (the same common law that bestowed personal rights on the colonists) the power of jurisdiction over the colonies.

This jurisdiction was extended to the court in Halifax. “I shall open my mind freely to you on this head,” wrote Howard, and proceeded to do so. Smuggling was “a crime against the law of nature, [but] had well nigh become established in some of the colonies.” Mercantile influence had corrupted the local admiralty courts in the colonies. Since customs duties could not be collected through the usual path, the government had no choice but to enact a more rigid system. Merchants had brought the severity of the new system upon themselves—but with the court run by an honest man, as the current judge, Mr. Spry, surely was, the honest trader had nothing to fear. The new regulations, the “employing of cutters and the enlarged power of the admiralty,” were simply a way to ensure that commerce was fair. Howard, again, held that the interest of the colony was equivalent to that of the mother country, and that therefore Rhode Island should strive to please Britain. Both he and


Hopkins tried to minimize the reality of conflict between colonies and metropole, but the process revealed the vast divergence between the writers’ views and the tense social conflict in Rhode Island.\(^ {19} \)

The *Halifax Letter* also hinted towards a trend that would quickly come to dominate the pamphlet wars between Howard and his opponents, the personal attack. Howard’s were generally sarcastic and subtle, two qualities that would be lost on his victims. Replying to Hopkins’ assertions that the Sugar Act would impoverish the colonies and particularly Rhode Island, Howard claimed little knowledge himself of the practicalities of colonial trade. But he wrote, referring to Hopkins, that “little minds, attached to their own sordid interest and long used to the greatest licentiousness in trade are...very incompetent judges of it.”\(^ {20} \) Although Howard did not directly identify his opponent and launch an *ad hominem* attack, he turned away from the argument itself to infer nefarious motives on the author’s part—a bending, if not a breaking, of the ideals of negativity and controversy.

Clearly, Howard was using his pamphlet both to elucidate constitutional arguments and to point out the hypocrisy of Rhode Island’s elite. He forcefully brought up the smuggling so prevalent among the colony’s ships, alluding to the long-standing culture of corruption among merchants and officials. If Rhode Islanders did everything by the book—and Howard knew they did not—they had nothing to fear. But instead “sordid interest” got in their way and tainted their arguments. Rhode Islanders were corrupt and not disinterested; they could not stake a proper claim to a place as virtuous Englishmen until and unless they cleaned up their illicit trading and acted as proper British citizens.

Such a provocative pamphlet could not—and did not—go unanswered. Hopkins himself responded in a three-part serial in the *Providence Gazette*. “A Vindication of a Late Pamphlet, entitled *The Rights of Colonies Examined,*” acted more as a defense of Hopkins’

\(^{19}\) Howard, “Halifax Letter,” 541-42.

earlier effort than an excursion into new constitutional realms. The first two portions primarily restated Hopkins’ positions with only the barest hint of personal enmity, but the third was less guarded. He began by calling the author of the *Halifax Letter* a “rampant letter writer,” full of “rage and malice,” and closed by attacking the proposals of “this madman….Drunk with rage at disappointment, he has retired into the dark, and grasping the dagger in his assassin hand, seems at a stand whether to plunge it into his country’s bowels or into his own.” Here the *ad hominem* attack took on new life, suggesting that the author of the *Halifax Letter* acted out of self-interest and a hatred of Rhode Island. However, it was still an attack on an anonymous author and not Martin Howard specifically.21

The third section also engaged Howard’s attack on smuggling in the colonies and his defense of the new vice-admiralty court. Hopkins’ defense on the smuggling question was simple: deny and obfuscate. First, he demanded to know in which colonies this “venality and corruption” abounded. Even in the colonies in which smuggling might have taken place, it was only a very small portion of the population who benefited, certainly not enough of the population to justify the measures taken by Parliament in instituting the Halifax court. And little smuggling, it was certain, took place in the northern colonies except in “the article of foreign molasses.” If the Halifax gentleman wanted to look for corruption there, he would have to search among the appointed customs officers, not the colonists, for the colonists had no power to collect the molasses duty. This was disingenuous in more ways than one, for it was only in the past year that Rhode Island had acquired a customs official—John Robinson—who was not colluding with the merchants of Newport and Providence.22

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The second reply to the *Halifax Letter* appeared in the *Providence Gazette* the same day as the first installment of Hopkins’ “Vindication.” This anonymous piece entitled “Some Account of a Pamphlet Lately Published in Newport” took a much more aggressive tack than did Hopkins’. In the first paragraph, the author began to strip the mask from the person of the “Halifax Gentleman,” calling the *Halifax Letter* “the product of some disappointed persons in Newport.” Its constitutional arguments were dismissed in a sarcastic rant before the author turned to the questions of smuggling and the vice-admiralty courts. Here the author added little to Hopkins’ earlier defense, making many of the same arguments but with much less eloquence. In this piece, the personal attacks on the “Halifax Gentleman” identified him with the Newport Junto, revealing both a little more of his identity as well as the existence of tensions among Rhode Island’s elite behind the facade of polite discourse.23

A third answer to the *Halifax Letter* was the product of Boston’s James Otis, Jr. Otis had personal experience with both Hopkins and Howard. He had defended the former in a lawsuit several years previously, while Howard had attacked a previous pamphlet of Otis’ in the *Halifax Letter*. And he was no doubt familiar with Rhode Island’s peculiar brand of politics, as his relative Major Jonathan Otis was one of Newport’s Sons of Liberty.24

Much like Hopkins and the anonymous writer to the *Gazette*, Otis defended the merchants that Howard had attacked as smugglers. His retort was that “only a few favorites”25 could get away with smuggling, both across the other colonies and in Rhode Island. Molasses was an exception, “as the importation of [it] was universally tolerated,


paying about one tenth the duties imposed by the old act.”26 Although he added little to previous arguments, Otis ended his pamphlet with a rhetorical flourish that, in light of later events, sounds curiously like a threat: “I shall take my leave of my gentleman [the “Halifax Gentleman”] by desiring him to reflect what would soon be his fate if the Americans should treat him as he most richly deserves.” By threatening the “Halifax Gentleman,” Otis threatened trouble for Howard personally, not just more rhetorical fire aimed at a pseudonym; further, he used the public’s wrath to intimidate, suggesting that the “Gentleman’s” opinions had already been judged wanting by the disinterested observer.27

The replies to the Halifax Letter, then, show a significant change in the overall tenor of the debate. When Howard called Hopkins’ bluff by explicitly accusing colonial merchants of smuggling, it brought social and imperial conflict into the open. In reply, Hopkins, Otis, and the anonymous author could only prevaricate; they chose to attack the messenger rather than the message. The anonymous writer tore at Howard’s cloak of anonymity; Otis warned Howard of the anger of the American people. And a postscript to Otis’ “Vindication” referred to Howard’s writing as (among other things) “the flutter of a coxcomb, the pedantry of a quack”28 before warning him again of the public wrath with a quote from Jonathan Swift’s Tale of a Tub: “Lord Peter...and his gang...by main force very fairly kicks them (Martyn and Jack) both out of doors, and would never let them come under his roof from that day to this.”29 Otis’ point, again, was that the “Halifax Gentleman’s” position placed him outside the sphere of virtuous disinterested citizens. The Boston writer’s attacks would only become more blatant in his next pamphlet.

Martin Howard, Jr. and the Newport Junto had not been entirely restful during the time in which Hopkins and Otis were replying to the “Halifax Letter.” Another list of “Queries” appeared in the first February edition of the Newport Mercury. Though the questions did not make explicit reference to Rhode Island, they repeated the arguments for industry and frugality that O.Z. had been making since the previous fall.\textsuperscript{30}

Three weeks later the Mercury printed one of the most assertive of the O.Z. letters to date. Here as never before the authors outlined their argument for the establishment of manufactures—accompanied by a direct attack on Rhode Island’s mercantile economy. The authors believed that imported articles that could be raised or made in the colonies were injurious to the colonies’ economic health because they “employed others at our expense.” Foreign trade, therefore, simply acted to “blunt the edge of industry.” Colonies, they argued, should not participate fully in trade and seagoing ventures until they had established sufficient manufactures to support themselves. The writers sadly noted that “a different scene and plan of acting in trade had taken place and preference in Rhode-Island.” The emphasis of trade over manufactures, they concluded, was the cause of the colony’s current economic downturn.\textsuperscript{31}

For the next two weeks O.Z. held forth on the growth and processing of flax. In the second of those letters the authors tied Rhode Island’s want of industry to the pamphlet wars of the last months. The study of certain Hogarth prints of an “industrious apprentice” would be far more beneficial to Rhode Islanders than reading about “the rights of colonies examined.” Nor would it hurt the colonists to learn about frugality and proper employment from these prints, rather than “fruitlessly and [unnecessarily enquire] about the writer of a letter from Halifax.” Here, again, the author of the Halifax Letter—soon to be revealed beyond

\textsuperscript{30} Newport Mercury, February 4, 1765.

\textsuperscript{31} Newport Mercury, February 25, 1765.
a doubt as Martin Howard, Jr.—took shelter within his now-tattered cloak of anonymity. He and Moffatt still tried to retain the protection afforded by the norms of the public sphere.32

On March 18, 1765, Samuel Hall printed what was to be the last of the O.Z. letters. Like the one three weeks before, it held forth on Rhode Island’s trade practices before shifting its subject to the production of flax. “Supreme rulers and statesmen” had always preferred industry to commerce, the former being a necessary precursor to the latter. But Rhode Islanders had been “smitten early with the lust of traffic,” engaging in commerce before manufactures. The “meer sound of trade has enchanted the people into a neglect of tillage...labour, industry, and employment,” the authors wrote. The rush to foreign trade had been, in sum, a failure—an assessment probably not shared by Newport’s richer merchants.33

But more provocative than this restatement of old arguments was the final section of the letter. Here the authors wrote directly to Samuel Hall, producing a statement of support in his behalf. For the week before Hall had been called into the state’s highest court to account for his actions in publishing a portion of a recent letter by Governor Hopkins to the colony’s agent in Britain. Hall had defended himself by simply saying that he did not know the missive was private, since it had been read in the Assembly and copies were circulating around town. O.Z. turned defense into assault, suggesting that the superior court was committing a “dangerous stretch of power...threatening to liberty.” The authors compared the court’s actions to those of “the Star Chamber, [or] the Spanish Inquisition.” Finally, O.Z. invoked The Rights of Colonies Examined, imputing that Hopkins might have been associated with the court proceedings (indeed, as governor, he had handpicked the court) and suggesting that “It is high time we had new overseers, the watchmen have betrayed the citadel.” This last was, perhaps, a reference to the upcoming elections in the colony, a

32. Newport Mercury, March 4 and 11, 1765; quotes from March 11.

33. Newport Mercury, March 18, 1765.
subject on which O.Z. had spent some words in the previous letters and in which Hopkins would be defeated by longtime rival Samuel Ward of Newport.34

The next week the Mercury was advertising Otis’ *Vindication of the British Colonies* for sale.35 Clearly it was time for O.Z. to again rest from his labors so that the gentleman from Halifax could respond to the vitriol being heaped upon his pamphlet. By the twenty-second of April, Hall was able to insert an advertisement for Howard’s latest piece, *A Defence of the Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax.*36

This effort immediately removed one layer of anonymity from Howard’s writing. Instead of writing as the “gentleman at Halifax,” Howard wrote the *Defence* as the product of the “editor of the Halifax Letter”—a statement that, technically, was surely true. Howard directed the new pamphlet almost entirely to Hopkins and Otis. The constitutional arguments became more tangled—Howard especially delighted in turning his opponents’ words against them, a task made easier by the fact that the two had themselves disagreed on some important points and that on others they had conceded the field to Howard. As interesting, though, are Howard’s responses on the subjects of smuggling and the vice-admiralty courts.

Again he made the argument that the means of enforcement was only appropriate given the nature of the problem at hand. “The employment of cutters, and enlarging the power of the admiralty,”37 were necessary reactions because “punishments must rise in proportion to offences.” Hopkins, of course, had argued that there was little if any smuggling in the northern colonies except of molasses. Howard called Hopkins on his denial. He granted that “the trade of foreign molasses, though illegal, is by far the least

34. *Newport Mercury*, March 18, 1765.
injurious of any.” But, Howard asked, could “this Providence writer imagine...that [the editor, Howard] dares not speak out what everybody knows to be true?”—the existence of a “most iniquitous smuggling trade” to Holland and other European countries that greatly hurt “Great-Britain and her manufactures.” Given the previous widespread smuggling, it was only the existence of the vice-admiralty court and the cutters of the Royal Navy that prevented the renewal of the trade, “practiced in such a manner, as to elude the contravention of custom-house officers.”

Money was the driving force between Rhode Island’s illicit trade, and Howard would pay smugglers “no compliment, at the expense of truth.”

As his referral to a “Providence writer” came closer to attacking Hopkins as a person rather than an anonymous writer, Howard’s final remark foreshadowed events to come. Declaring himself innocent of any wrongdoing, he nevertheless predicted that at some point soon, “those whom [Howard] has betrayed [would] demand retribution in a court of justice, for his falsehood and perfidy.”

Though perhaps he could not conceive of extralegal measures at this time, it was not, in the end, a court of law that would pronounce sentence on him.

Howard dismissed Otis’ Vindication as “a dreary waste of 32 pages” before moving on to a more important topic: the Halifax Letter’s treatment at the hands of the Rhode Island assembly. Many “warm members” were for burning the pamphlet; some were for action against the printer—a motion that may have helped lead to Hall’s appearance in front of the superior court. Howard condemned the assembly’s propositions as being “in the style of eastern despotism.” Finally, at the very end of the Defence, Howard promised to quit his

42. Howard, Defence of the Letter, 28.
pamphleteering, for private concerns took precedence and he thought it “wisdom to discontinue a controversy, which his antagonists had already made personal.”

If it had become personal before, it was nothing compared to what the next volley of pamphlets would bring. In a postscript to the Defence, Howard had expressed his glee over the recently passed Stamp Act, calling it “the most reasonable and equitable [duty] that can be devised.” It was likely Howard’s reaction to this hated piece of legislation that caused the next wave of attacks to take the form they did.

Both Hopkins and Otis responded to the Defence with pamphlets of their own. In each of those, personal attack took precedence over constitutional argument. Hopkins, in fact, spared the reader (and, no doubt, himself) the agony of any attempts at extrication from the legalistic maze in which Howard had caught him. Instead, Hopkins’ short pamphlet—eight pages, instead of the thirty-two found in most of the others—concentrated almost entirely on defaming Howard. Though nominally an anonymous work, no one could have had any doubt that Stephen Hopkins was the author. Nor—even though he was never mentioned by name—could the astute reader have harbored any doubts that Martin Howard, Jr. was the target of attack.

Hopkins’ tone is one of ranting sarcasm, unmasked vituperation; to list all the insults laid upon Howard would take up several pages. But some of the jeers and threats are particularly revealing of a process that was perhaps a necessary step towards the violence of the Stamp Act riot. Hopkins’ pamphlet began the final exclusion of Martin Howard, Jr. from the community. Though it was his beliefs that, they decided, put him outside the bounds of those who could argue within the public sphere, Hopkins (and later Otis) would expose Howard’s identity and defame his character in order to remove him from the debate.

44. Howard, Defence of the Letter, 30.
Hopkins accused him of having “conspired against the liberties of [his] country...[and] from [his] dark retreat stab[bing] private characters. The latter of these is but as a murder, but in doing the former you are guilty of parricide.”\textsuperscript{45} Howard, moreover, had been a false friend to Hopkins, having betrayed him during the course of a lawsuit several years previously. And Howard had also done great wrong to his former teacher, for having “justly forfeited all esteem in the family where you had learnt your trade,” he ended his apprenticeship abruptly before the end of his term and “fell to undermining that gentleman’s character, and sapping him in his business, that you might rise upon his ruins.”\textsuperscript{46} Howard, in short, was not just a traitor to his country. He was also a betrayer of his friends and of his master—strong accusations indeed, calculated to undermine Howard’s right to a role in society.

And in his glee over the “enslaving” of the colonies—Hopkins’ term regarding Howard’s approval of the Stamp Act—Howard proved himself to be “a Turk by practice as well as by speculation.” His defense of the hated duty might be “remembered by others...and perhaps you may be disturbed now and then at your retirement by a small tap upon the coxcomb.”\textsuperscript{47} The ethnic reference to Howard as “a Turk”—obviously a slur—is another way in which Hopkins tried to rhetorically remove Howard from proper society. At the same time, the threat of “a tap upon the coxcomb” was more aggressive than those that had gone before.

James Otis, unfortunately, did not dispense with constitutional issues in his pamphlet. It might have been better for him if he had, for his arguments were but desperate, unsuccessful attempts to stem the flow of blood from the wounds Howard had inflicted. But, as if to make up for the paucity of his arguments, Otis took his personal attacks to a

\textsuperscript{45} Stephen Hopkins, \textit{A Letter to the Author of the Halifax Letter, Occasioned by His Book, Entitled, a Defence of That Letter} (Newport, RI, 1765), 4.

\textsuperscript{46} Hopkins, \textit{Letter to the Author}, 6.

\textsuperscript{47} Hopkins, \textit{Letter to the Author}, 6.
new level. For Otis, the Newport Junto was no better than a “little, dirty, drinking, drabbing, contaminated knot of thieves, beggars and transports, or the worthy descendants of such, collected from the four winds of the earth, and made up of Turks, Jews and other Infidels, with a few renegado Christians & Catholics.” Here he repeated Hopkins’ ethnic slur, multiplied it, and followed it up later by calling Howard a “Tartar.”

Otis all but removed the last vestiges of Howard’s anonymity by referring to the author of the *Halifax Letter* as “Martinus Scriblerus” and “my dear M-rt-n.” His compatriot Dr. Moffatt was alternately “Dr. Murphy,” “Dr. Smallbrain,” and “that mawgazeen of knowledge Dr. Mumchance.” Otis unconvincingly dismissed their arguments in the O.Z. letters for establishing American manufactures as only an excuse “to excite the jealousy of the British manufacturers, [so] that the colonies might incur the displeasure of the administration.”

Thus Otis’ and Hopkins’ pamphlets revealed the two Junto members as corrupt, self-interested men acting against the interests of the community. To participate in the print public sphere, authors had to be assumed to be disinterested and virtuous; the *ad hominem* attacks (to the extent they were believed) had removed that possibility. Fear and frustration over Parliament’s indifference to the colonial plight had shown that a battle in the realm of rational discourse would gain the colonists nothing—the Stamp Act had been passed despite their protests. Instead, they turned against the persons who supported imperial policy.


The ways in which tensions continued to develop after this are not clear from the printed sources. True to his word, Martin Howard, Jr. did not respond to the assaults. Neither did he or his compatriots in the Junto pen any more missives on industry under the O.Z. moniker. The silence was probably involuntary, for the Mercury’s publisher Samuel Hall had switched allegiances. Perhaps frightened by his appearances before the court and the assembly, perhaps due to true indignation at the regulations imposed by the Stamp Act (he was after all a newspaper printer, someone certain to be taxed heavily on stamped paper,) Hall became a critic of British policy. The tone of the articles in the Newport Mercury changed to reflect his new position. There was certainly no room in the new Mercury for O.Z.’s diatribes against Rhode Island corruption and its reliance on commerce.

The threat signified by the Maidstone was yet another source of tension for the people of Newport during the spring and summer of 1765. The HMS Maidstone spent the spring conducting “the hottest Press ever known” in Newport. The continual impresement of seamen quickly began to interfere with the day-to-day life of the seaport city. By June seamen’s wages had “advanced nearly one dollar and an half per month.” Ships from other ports were afraid to come in to Newport, a situation that—among other losses—stopped the supply of wood, lumber that was desperately needed that winter to warm the poor. And Newporters themselves, especially fishermen, also refused to leave port. Newporters believed that here, without a doubt, was clear evidence of the damaging effects of British economic policies on the people of Rhode Island.55

Finally, on June 8, after the Maidstone’s sailors had impressed the entire crew of a brigantine returning from Africa, Newport’s people—in a mob described by Samuel Ward as “the dregs of the people, and a number of boys and negroes”—rioted, dragging one of the Maidstone’s boats to the center of town and burning it. Tensions remained high for several

55. Newport Mercury, June 10, 1765; Rhode Island Colonial Records, vol. 6, 444-46.
weeks until the pressed seamen were released—and even then the Maidstone stayed in Narragansett Bay.⁵⁶

As temperatures rose during the long hot summer, the Maidstone thankfully returned to the open sea only to be replaced on the Newport watch by the Cygnet. The new sloop cut through the light breezes of Narragansett Bay as had its predecessor, and as the time grew shorter before Stamp Act took effect, the pressure in the town became ever more intense.

When the Mercury printed Virginia’s Stamp Act Resolves on June 24, becoming the first newspaper in the colonies to do so, it suggested an outlet for the people of Newport. Not only did the Mercury publish the five resolves that had passed the House of Burgesses, but they also printed two proposed resolves. These had been debated but rejected, yet the Mercury printed them as if they had passed with the others, thus suggesting that a potentially violent course of action had been authorized by the assembly of the respected Virginia colony. For one read:

That any Person who shall, by Speaking or Writing, assert or maintain, That any Person or Persons, other than the General Assembly of this Colony, with such Consent as aforesaid, have any Right or Authority to lay or impose any Tax whatever on the Inhabitants thereof, shall be Deemed, AN ENEMY TO THIS HIS MAJESTY’S COLONY.⁵⁷

Whomever its sponsors in the Virginia gentry meant to implicate with this resolve, it could easily be read by Rhode Island readers as a condemnation of men like Howard and Moffatt, who as O.Z. and the “Halifax Gentleman” had asserted the rights of outsiders to tax their colony. Therefore, the logic of the resolve made clear, they were to be deemed enemies to Rhode Island.

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⁵⁶. Newport Mercury, June 10, 1765; Rhode Island Colonial Records, vol. 6, 444-46.

⁵⁷. Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 98-100.
The news of the riots in Boston on August 14th was perhaps taken by Newporters as a signal to act. Certainly Martin Howard, Jr. felt threatened. In an extraordinary letter published by the *Newport Mercury* on August 26—signed with his own name and not a pseudonym—he tried to refute all the attacks on him in the past months.

"The Author of the Halifax Letter gives out to the public," Howard began, "That he is a Native of the Colonies, and has a Heart as warmly attached to their true Interest as any Man whatever." With one stroke of his pen Howard simultaneously tried to cast off the illusion of anonymity and declare himself a member of the community. His opinions, he argued, were published "with that Freedom, which is the Priviledge, & ought to be the Boast of every Englishman." There were those trying to take that privilege away from him "by instigating the Populace and endeavoring to point their Fury against the Person and Interest of a Man, merely because he happens to differ in Opinion from his Countrymen."58

The letter concluded, "The writer does not retract any Position contained in the Halifax Letter, and therefore does not meanly solicit any Favour or Exemption from the Abuse intended him, because if his Person and Interest become the Objects of popular Revenge for these Sentiments, he thinks he shall never lament the Cause, whatever may be the Consequences."59 Howard had clearly been warned of an imminent action. The built-up tensions in the community were his downfall—the imminent Stamp Act, the predatory *Cygnet* in the harbor ready to strike against the maritime community, all those malevolent forces emanating from British corruption and of which Howard was the staunchest defender.

That was to be Howard's last appearance in the *Mercury*. The following day he, Moffatt, and Stamp Master Augustus Johnston would be hung in effigy; the night after his house would be attacked and his personal property destroyed in a riot, and by the first of

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58. *Newport Mercury*, August 26, 1765.

September he and Moffatt would take sail across the Atlantic. But the legacy of the pamphlet war and the O.Z. letters remained: the effigies of Howard and Moffatt would be defined by the words they had penned, as labels bearing their words and those of Otis that insulted them would be tacked upon them. In this way the very last shield of their anonymity was removed: in public, the texts were identified with their authors, represented as individual, material beings.

Johnston’s effigy was labeled straightforwardly; epithets and objects referred to his office. On his breast was written “The Stamp Man,” and his right hand held a copy of the Stamp Act. But Howard’s and Moffatt’s were only comprehensible to those who knew their writings. On Moffatt’s chest someone had written “that infamous, miscreated, leering jacobite Doct’r Murfy,” while placing a letter in his right hand addressed “To that Mawgazeene of Knowledge Doct’r Muffy in Rhode Island.” On his right arm they wrote “If I had but Rec’d this Letter from the Earl of Bute But One Week sooner.” What Bute might have written to Moffatt is unknown, but the crowd’s leaders also hung a boot—a popular symbol of the earl—over Moffatt’s shoulder “with the Devil Peeping out of it.” Moffatt also had a strip of paper hanging from his mouth, a technique that recalled the cartoons of the day (and of today) in which words are encased in bubbles leading from the speaker’s mouth. Moffatt was saying “It is too late Martinius to Retract, for we are all Aground.”

But it was for “Martinius,” Martin Howard, Jr., that the vilest epithets were kept. On his breast they wrote “that fawning insidious, infamous miscreant and paracide Martinius Scriblerus,” and on his right arm, “the only filial pen.” In his right hand was a copy of the *Halifax Letter*, symbol now of Howard’s beliefs. Two sayings were scribed on the other arm: “curs’d ambition and your cursed clan has ruined me,” and “what tho’ I boast of independance posterity will curse my memory.”


61. “Almy to Story, August 29, 1765,” 236.
Finally, the posts of the gallows were inscribed with sayings that might have covered all three, but especially Howard and Moffatt. "We have an Hereditary Indefeasible Right to a Halter, Besides we Encourag'd the Growth of Hemp you know," was written on one post—a clear reference to the letters of O.Z. that had promoted home manufactures and a shift from a mercantile to agricultural economy. The other post held the forbidding statement, "That Person who shall Efface this Publick Mark of Resentment will be Deem'd an Enemy to liberty and Accordingly meet with Proper Chastisement." 62

The effigy hanging represented the final shift from a print dispute, nominally carried out under the unwritten rules of genteel public discourse, to a conflict negotiated in the realm of active and immediate public performance. Howard and Moffatt could not defend their houses by force; they would have neither voice nor chance in this next phase of the conflict. But the defeat of the Stamp Act's supporters could not erase discord in Newport. Dissent between elites and non-elites, between those who supported British policy and those who opposed it, would continue to split the community. These conflicts would be played out over the next several days.

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CHAPTER 2

"THE WHOLE WAS CONDUCTED WITH MODERATION":

THE STRUGGLE IN THE STREETS

The last week of August turned Newport upside down. For August 26th, a few of Newport’s elite merchants planned an effigy-hanging designed to duplicate the Boston event of the 14th of the month. It is probable they were intending a dramatic display of force as well—attacks on the houses of the pro-Stamp Act writers Martin Howard Jr. and Thomas Moffatt that, again, would echo the vengeance taken on Massachusetts Stamp Master Andrew Oliver’s house. But they were not prepared for what would happen next. By the afternoon after the riots, if not before, the crowd they had encouraged had effectively gained control of the city and proceeded to hold it for several days. The straightforward demonstration against Stamp Act officer and supporters turned into a violent conflagration in which several separate groups, each acting according to its own interest, took advantage of the unrest and the failure of authority to fight for its own interests. The elite merchants attempted to create a single, local community united peacefully against the Stamp Act. Their proxies among the middle and lower classes used vigorous threats to attempt reforms in the customs system and the return of a sloop held by the Royal Navy. And the lower sorts—seamen, certainly, but also artisans and others connected to the maritime industry—threatened the elites and the Royal Navy as well as the supporters of imperial policy. For this last group in particular, economic suffering, fears of impressment, and
disrespect from leaders on both pro- and anti-Stamp Act sides were much more important in inspiring their actions during the crisis.

In two ways, cultural history can play a particular role in illuminating the events in Newport. First, it allows us to isolate different, culturally defined forms of communication and community-building—public processions, oratory, and the like. During the Newport crisis, factions used the forms available to them. Elite merchants took advantage of face-to-face contacts, personal relationships with those above and below, and the deference still theoretically due them in their hierarchical society. They also used vernacular traditions—effigy-hangings and house attacks—as a form of extralegal enforcement of justice. In doing so, the elite enlisted the seamen and laborers of Newport, who at first released their energies and frustrations in accordance with the merchants' wishes but afterwards pressed towards solutions of their own problems, threatening the elite's houses with the same destruction they had inflicted on Howard's and Moffatt's. In contrast, the Stamp Act supporters (so verbose in the world of print) were silenced and then removed from the physical community as they had been excluded from the realm of rational discourse.

Second, cultural history illuminates the way the story of the riot was told. What writers and printers chose to put down on paper became an official record of the event, what was not told could disappear from public memory. The publisher of the Newport Mercury, Samuel Hall, was a vigorous opponent of the Stamp Act and an egregious elider of fact; his coverage omitted events and context in ways that cast the elite merchants in the best possible light and blamed nameless members of the lower orders for the violence. Letters written by Newport's Stamp Act supporters and Captain Leslie of the Cygnet remain more reliable sources; their stories reinforced each other and depicted a complex interplay among factions in Newport. But it was the elite merchants, taking advantage of their control of the printed page, who had the last word in the conflict.
On August 14, a crowd in Boston ransacked the house of the Massachusetts Stamp Master, Andrew Oliver. It was, to the town’s “Loyal Nine” who led resistance to imperial policy, an unexpected but not unwelcome culmination to a day’s ceremonial activity. Earlier in the day, a well-orchestrated crowd had hung Oliver in effigy, paraded the effigy past the Town House, and pulled down a small building Oliver had constructed to act as a stamp office. They then ritually beheaded the effigy in front of Oliver’s house (meanwhile shattering his windows with stones) before burning it atop Fort Hill on the very timbers that had once been the stamp office. Finally the crowd, under the direction of shoemaker Ebenezer Mackintosh, returned to Oliver’s house and destroyed his belongings—furniture, mirrors, even the wainscoting, if not the house’s infrastructure itself.1

Though Boston’s “Loyal Nine” of Stamp Act resistors had not planned the house attack, just the effigy-hanging, the whole had been conducted in an orderly enough way that the events of the 14th inspired Newport’s elite merchants (in contact and, no doubt, competition with their Boston counterparts) to plan for a similar display of their own. Martin Howard, Jr. had heard rumors of the plan and on the 20th told Thomas Moffatt that there was “a design being a foot of exposing the Effigial figures of Mr Johnson Him and me [Howard and Moffatt] as on the 27th that day being in course a Quarterly meeting of the Newport Freeholders.” Over the next several days Howard and Moffatt separately visited Rhode Island’s governor Samuel Ward in attempts to gain some sort of protection from the designs of the ringleaders. Ward dismissed Howard’s worries on the 24th, saying that he knew of the design but thought nothing would be done “besides the exposing of the Effigies.” Similarly, Moffatt in his capacity of physician visited Ward the next day and took

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the opportunity to try to convince the governor to suppress the activities of his friends.

Ward told Moffatt he would act.²

What happened next we only know secondhand from Moffatt’s account, but apparently, Ward called in the wealthy Newport merchants Samuel Vernon and William Ellery, the supposed planners of the effigy-hanging, and asked them to “prevail with their accomplices to forbear proceeding farther in that affair then dismissing them both he only requested their appearance before him next morning to give an account of their mediations.” Whatever the content of their “mediations,” Vernon and Ellery clearly chose to carry on with the public display. The next morning, that of the 26th, Moffatt and Vernon met by happenstance. Confronted by the doctor, Vernon reaffirmed his commitment to the proceedings, saying that “he and his Confederates proceeded upon just principles drawn from the absolute necessity of some proper sacrifices at this dangerous and very critical conjuncture.” Howard and Moffatt were considered because they had, the merchant suggested, maintained the authority of Parliament and had convinced others to do the same; in addition, Howard “in his Halifax letter [had] branded the merchants of Rhode Island as smugglers which accusation alone deserves death.” Moffatt defended his and Howard’s writings as being the only defense for the colony when its disloyalty was eventually crushed by Britain “because they would serve to shew that the defection was not universal.” Finally, he warned Vernon of the dangers of exciting “the rabble,” suggesting that the merchant might gain a certain prestige by being the “Chief instrument” in preventing such a scene.³

Moffatt’s letter was written for a sympathetic audience (his friend Joseph Harrison, a Junto member when he had lived in Newport) and thus smacks of a certain amount of self-righteousness. However, it still reveals a great deal about the nature of personal relationships


³ “Moffatt to Harrison, October 16, 1765,” 111-12.
and face-to-face communication in colonial Newport. First, it reflects the networks of patronage that connected the particulars in the situation. Both the pro-Stamp Act writers and the merchant elite were aware of Ward’s power, not simply as a representative of the Crown (for Ward was a product of a colonial election and not a royal appointee) but as a local distributor of patronage. If Ward forbade the merchants from proceeding against Howard and Moffatt, they would have to listen to him; if he instead extended his blessing for action, Vernon and Ellery would be protected to the limits of Ward’s power from retribution. The negotiations of patronage were carried out not through print, but by careful, face-to-face meetings.

As the Newport elite planned for an effigy-hanging and demonstration echoing that of the 14th in Boston, the larger city played host to an even larger and more violent conflagration—one that, it was agreed, went beyond the bounds of extralegal action set by the earlier riot. On the evening of the 26th, a bonfire rallied the Boston mob to action; by the next morning, the crowd had attacked several houses. William Story, the Deputy Register of the Admiralty Court and a man believed to be sending accusatory reports against Boston merchants home to Britain, had his private and public papers destroyed as well as much of his furniture. Simultaneously, Comptroller of Customs Benjamin Hallowell’s house was ransacked and nearly destroyed by another mob. Finally, the two groups united to destroy, systematically and completely, the house and belongings of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson. It would have taken only a day for Newport to hear of the destruction of the second Boston riot; if the city did not know of it by the 27th when they replicated Boston’s effigies of the 14th, they would certainly be aware of Boston’s rise on the 28th when the similarly destructive Newport riot took place.4

But the same day as the Boston riot, the 26th, Howard’s extraordinary letter to the Mercury appeared, challenging the people of Newport to do their worst (see chapter 1).

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Howard's defiant missive must have simply strengthened the resolve of the Newport merchants to put his and Moffatt’s sins on public display. They had chosen for action the 27th of the month, the day on which the Newport freeholders would hold their quarterly meeting at the Colony House. Just after five that morning “a Mob Assembled and Erected a Gallows near the Town House and then Dispers’d.” Later that morning, a procession hung halters around the necks of three effigies representing Howard, Moffatt, and Newport Stamp Master Augustus Johnston. “Attended by a Person in the Character of Hangman,” the effigies were paraded through the central areas of the town.\(^5\) Starting from a point on Thames Street—the busiest road, running north to south along the waterfront, a crowd “Reassembled and took the Effigys… and Carted them up Thames Street, then up King Street to the said Gallows,” before hanging them fifteen feet above the ground, the better to show the bodies to the assembled crowd. In other words, the procession ran along the bustling merchant- and artisan-occupied Thames Street at one of the busiest times of the day, to the main intersection at the corner of Thames and the Long Wharf before proceeding eastwards to the plaza fronting the Colony House, Rhode Island and Newport’s seat of government.\(^6\)

By processioning the effigies across town and hanging them in Newport’s public space, the elite merchants and the gathered crowd had proclaimed in a traditional manner their disdain for the three men so treated. If the various labels were primarily understandable by the members of the community who had read the pamphlet debates and the newspaper screeds of the previous year, then another form of printed material, a “New Song,” had much more potential to summarize Newport’s grievances for those who hadn’t closely

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6. “William Almy to Elisha Story, August 29, 1765,” Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 55 (March 1922): 235. Almy certainly meant Queen Street, for Queen led to the Colony House where other sources tell us the gallows were placed. There was a King Street running off Thames, but it led only to the outskirts of town.
followed the controversy in print. On one of the gallows’ posts, someone had posted a song to be sung by the crowd:

HE who for a Post, or base sordid Self,
His Country betrays, makes a Rope for himself;
Of this an Example before you we bring,
In these infamous Rogues, who in Effigy swing.

Huzza, my brave Boys! —every Man stand his ground,
With Liberty’s Praise let the Welkin resound;
Eternal Disgrace on those miscreants fall,
Who thro’ Pride or for Wealth would ruin us all

Let us make wise Resolves, and then let’s stand strong
(Your Puffs and your Vapours do never last long)
To maintain our just Rights ev’ry measure pursue,
To our King we’ll be loyal—to ourselves we’ll be true

Those Blessings our Fathers obtain’d by their blood;
We are justly oblig’d as their Sons to make good;
All internal Taxes let us then nobly spurn,
These Effigies first—next the Stamp Paper burn.

CHORUS: Sing Tantarara, burn all, burn all
Sing Tantarara, burn all

The song implicated the men for two reasons: their attempt to have the Rhode Island charter revoked and their support of the Stamp Act. The words of the song supported the interests of the wealthy merchants, which the three had trod upon. But the ringleaders took pains to draw the wider community into their net, thus making it appear that the whole society backed their specific grievances.

The crowd had been able to march with the effigies and view them swinging high in the summer breeze; singing a song allowed the crowd to move from observation to participation. Those Newporters who were not engaged with the parliamentary debates could take visceral pleasure in singing a song that only referenced the Junto’s deeds in the most general terms. Even those who were illiterate could hear the words and then follow along rather than reading the song as posted. Most importantly, the communal act of performing by its nature included everyone, whether they were interested in the specifics of the Junto’s behavior or not.

The effigies had been accompanied by a “hangman” in their journey through the town. But more extraordinary than the character who was charged with the effigies’ execution were the characters that the ringleaders portrayed. When the Governor and the freeholders arrived at the Colony House at eleven in the morning, they were greeted by the sight of the effigies hanging, “guarded only by Samuel Vernon William Ellery and Robert Crook who walkd under and before it in muffled big coats flappd hats and bludgeons.”8 In this performance, the merchants hiding behind heavy coats and under wide hats in the hot August sun became “anonymous” figures whose true identities everyone nevertheless knew—a striking parallel to the norm of negativity from the earlier print debates. Here it was Vernon, Ellery, and Crook who were representing the virtuous, disinterested public—but they were doing so in a public performance rather than in a pamphlet war. Further, their

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8. “Moffatt to Harrison, October 16, 1765,” 112.
bludgeons brought to mind the public’s role as judge; but in this case the public had already decided that the three men being hung in effigy were guilty.

The ringleaders made sure that a crowd gathered for the ritual burning early in the evening. Moffatt wrote that with perhaps fewer people gathered for the festivities then they would have liked, the merchants were forced to send into the street “strong Drink in plenty with Cheshire cheese and other provocatives to intemperance and riot.”9 Since other authors, even those with who supported imperial policy, did not suggest that there was any trouble with non-attendance, it is likely that Moffatt was trying to place more blame on the elite merchants for what happened the next day and that instead the distribution of food was part of a traditional ritual designed to bind the community together while reinforcing deference towards the community’s leaders who gave out the drink and cheese.

In the early evening, the effigies were cut down, placed on a pile of wood under the gallows, and “a Fire was made, and the Effigies consumed, amidst the Acclamations of the People.” The fire was the culmination of the day, and both Tories and Whigs agreed that “the whole was conducted with Moderation, and no Violence offered to the Persons or Property of any Man.”10 However, John Robinson preferred to believe that the situation would have escalated had not Johnston, Howard, and Moffatt all left town earlier in the day. Instead the mob “deferred a further Prosecution of their Malice and Resentment, till a more favourable opportunity.”11

Thus, the effigy-hanging represented a turning point in the Newport crisis. First, it continued earlier practices from the pamphlet debates. The labels on the effigies came from their own and their opponents’ writings from the previous year. And the actions of Vernon,


10. *Newport Mercury* (Newport, RI), September 2, 1765. In his report, Augustus Johnston agreed that the events of the 27th were conducted systematically and peacefully. See “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”

Ellery, and Crook in guarding the gallows “in muffled big coats flappd hats and bludgeons” represented the extension of cherished ideals regarding proper civic debate from the world of print to the stage of active performance. Second, the effigy-hanging opened the war against the Stamp Act supporters to the rest of the community. By staging a public display that traveled through the most active parts of the town and culminated in a dramatic day-long ceremony at the center of town authority, the ringleaders drew the attention and participation of the townspeople. The active ceremonies of song-singing, of public feasting, and of uniting to watch the effigies burn were intended to rally the hierarchically organized community to defy British authority as represented by the bodies of the three men.

* *

The next day, however, would bring the violence that Robinson feared. At first everything seemed peaceful—Johnston, Howard, and Moffatt returned and there was no popular uproar. But late that afternoon, an unexpected personal encounter transformed the situation. While walking along Queen Street, Howard, Robinson, and two other men (possibly Moffatt and Johnston) were stopped by a small but aggressive party of men. At the forefront was one Samuel Crandall, a man who “had received a private injury from” Robinson and now “insisted on satisfaction.” Crandall then “attacked and Collared” Robinson “in the Public Street.” Robinson quickly disengaged himself and returned home, leaving Howard to assert the rights of gentlemen in colonial society by “reproving [Crandall]
for his insolence." But the disgruntled Crandall and his friends would have none of this, and gave Howard and the remaining men "a Return [that] induced them to withdraw and go towards Mr. Howard's House." But the disgruntled Crandall and his friends would have none of this, and gave Howard and the remaining men "a Return [that] induced them to withdraw and go towards Mr. Howard's House."15

Word of the confrontation spread quickly. A crowd "muster'd and beset" Howard's house early in the evening, but "not finding the Gentlemen there, they shattered some of the Windows, and went off."17 Howard's house cut an imposing figure in the physical landscape of Newport in the same way that he had made himself a significant figure in the social landscape. Though Howard's house was neither the largest nor best-furnished in town, its construction illustrates the wide gap in consumption and wealth between a gentleman like Howard and the poor of the town. Martin Howard Jr. lived in a style that befitted his stature as a well-to-do lawyer, a significant man in Newport society if not one of the wealthiest merchants. But if he did not live in a mansion such as those occupied by the wealthiest merchants, neither did he live in a dockside hovel with two or three other families as did many Newport sailors.

Howard's house lay on Broadway, in the northern part of Newport and distant from the wild dockside area; if it was not in the more fashionable Court Square or Easton Point areas of town, where wealthy merchants kept their townhouses, there were other compensations, for it was less than a hundred yards north of the courtroom at the Colony House, and thus convenient for a lawyer. The house already had a rich history in Newport and thus retained its status as a prominent place in the landscape. It had been built by the Seventh-Day Adventist preacher Stephen Mumford around the turn of the century. As such, it was originally constructed with casement windows and perhaps with facade gables,

15. Newport Mercury, September 2, 1765.
17. Newport Mercury, September 2, 1765.
reminiscent more of Puritan austerity than the fashionable, Anglicized, “Georgian” exterior of symmetrically placed windows surrounding a central doorway. With its two stories each containing two large rooms, as well as a large attic and a basement, the house was quite expansive by seventeenth-century standards. The interior decoration paralleled the exterior: its sturdy timber framing (a mix of hewn and mill-sawn beams, a common mix at the turn of the century) was exposed to view throughout the house and the timbers were sculpted into decorative elements. Longitudinal summer beams spanned the two first-floor rooms and each was decorated with flat chamfers and lamb’s tongue stops. The plates and posts also were exposed and decorated with simple flat chamfers. Access to the two rooms on the upper was only possible from an awkward, narrow, straight stair from one of the first-floor rooms. The fireboxes in the two first-floor rooms were six feet across with rounded corners—yet two more markers to the genteel observer that this house was sixty years old in 1757 and had not kept pace with fashion.18

In size the house was still respectable by the standards of the 1760s, especially when augmented by the kitchen addition made in 1724 by future governor Richard Ward (the father of Samuel Ward). But by the time Howard purchased it at auction in 1757, it had fallen well behind the pack in terms of style. Previous owners had fallen in social status, each progressively less concerned with genteel style than with the necessities of life: after the famous preacher and the lawyer, the house had passed through the hands of several artisans including a simple tanner before Howard purchased it and began significant renovations.

“Location, location, location!” is the motto of modern-day real estate, and it must have been its proximity to the Colony House and not its condition that inspired Martin Howard to buy the house he did. It was in the right spot; the house itself could be modified to fit his needs and conform to the fashions expected by his clients in the tony neighborhood of Court Square. Howard spent his earnings liberally to bring the house up to date. He reduced the size of the first-floor fireplaces (ingeniously turning the extra space into cupboards), paneled many of the rooms, covered exposed framing members with decorative casings, replaced the narrow straight stair with an enclosed central staircase accessible from the entry hall, and painted the interior and probably the exterior. While previous owner Richard Ward, perhaps in 1724 when he built the kitchen addition, had replaced the casement windows with more modern sash windows, Howard added a fifth bay of windows to the west or front facade. It cost some effort to do so—he had to cut into one of the earliest structural elements, a brace that supported the post on the south wall on the second floor but he achieved a close approximation to the perfectly symmetrical Georgian facade that advertised wealth and good taste. The facade would have been supported by the linden trees that grew in front of the house and the tasteful garden behind.

Howard also outfitted the interior of his house with fine furniture and consumer goods appropriate to his station. From memory seven years later he made a list of the possessions he had lost in the riot: these included a “large mahogany table,” four “large family pictures, gilt frames; one by Sir Peter Lely,” a “jappanned tea-table and tea board,” a “jappanned high case of drawers,” and other fine items of furniture.19

By renovating the old house and furnishing it with genteel objects, Howard advertised his presence in the physical and social landscapes of Newport. But Howard’s

visibility had its disadvantages: being visible and not anonymous, he could be attacked. And as his person had been pilloried in print by the epithets of James Otis Jr. and Stephen Hopkins, and then hung and burnt in effigy by the Newport crowd, so his person could be attacked through the structure that metaphorically represented his body: his house.20

The tinkling of a few panes of glass shattering on the ground of Howard’s lot represented small damage to a house of this stature. Perhaps after a brief search for the men, the crowd—“not satisfied with the Mischief they had done”—returned to Howard’s “with redoubled Fury, broke the Windows and Doors all to Pieces, damaged the Partitions of the House, and ruined such furniture as was left in it, the best Part being happily removed out between the Attacks.”21 This description, from the Mercury, emphasized the uncontrolled and dangerous aspects of the mob; in doing so, it conflated a second attack on Howard’s house, later that evening, with the earlier one. The earlier attack, according to Moffatt and other observers, seems to have concentrated on personal and movable goods, while the later attacks damaged the house itself.

Indeed, Thomas Moffatt believed the event was anything but spontaneous; he thought he recognized the “chief ringleaders of yesterday’s spectacle [the effigy-hanging]” as they “rushd into the streets with a chosen band of Ruffians at their heels having their faces painted and being prepar’d and furnish’d with broad axes and other tools of desolation proceeded huzzaing” to Howard’s, entering the house forcibly and destroying his furniture, china, and looking glasses. The “Ruffians” carried off all his clothing and his bed and table linens while drinking the wine from his cellar. After visiting Howard’s house, the crowd surged towards Moffatt’s. The rioters there “split open the doors committing the same acts of violence pillage and rage in every instance,” Moffatt wrote, “and were even so brutal after


hewing down the mahogany cases as to throw what books they could not carry off or otherwise destroy into the well with all my writings Physical instruments and many other articles which I highly valued.”

Indeed, a list of Moffatt’s belongings damaged or destroyed in the riot illustrates the genteel objects owned by a man of learning in the eighteenth century as Howard’s house revealed the setting in which they might have been used. Moffatt lost folio and quarto volumes numbering in the hundreds, covering medicine, opera, anatomy, history, religion (the Bible and the Koran), written in English and Latin. “Physical instruments” included a telescope, a microscope, thermometers and barometers (for the meteorological investigations he conducted with Congregational minister Ezra Stiles), mirrors and magnets. Genteel furniture abounded: mahogany book cases, tables, chairs, and tea tables, perhaps built in the workshop of John Cahoone, a local cabinetmaker whose stylish and elegant furniture were particularly prized by Newport’s loyalist faction. Expensive china, paintings, personal papers and drawings completed Moffatt’s inventory of losses, which he valued in total at £960 though the letters and papers “properly speaking were to Doctor Moffatt unvaluable,” or invaluable.

Johnston and Robinson heard about the riot the same way that Howard and Moffatt had heard of the effigy-hanging—by word-of-mouth. As the house attacks were taking place, friends of the Tory faction ran to warn the other potential victims. Sitting in his house with his family, Augustus Johnston “was in hope that we should have no more disturbance but about 8 O’Clock a Messenger came to my House in great Haste & informed me that the Mob had again Collected and were then at Mr. Howards House and had almost destroyed it.” The mob, he was told, was next going to do the same to Moffatt’s and then to his own

22. “Moffatt to Harrison, October 16, 1765,” 112.

house as well as Robinson's. "In about fifteen Minutes I received," he no doubt exaggerated, "upwards of fifty messages to the same purport." Johnston, after considering a full-on defense of his house, prudently decided to retreat to the home of fellow crown officer, Searcher of the Port Nicholas Lechmere, after having "his Wife and four small sick Children taken out of their beds and removed to a place of safety." 24

Similarly, John Robinson received a warning from a sympathizer, if not the fifty messages that inundated the still-respected Johnston. His housemate, the British army lieutenant Benjamin Wickham, warned him that "the same Mob [that attacked him in the street] assisted by many others" had vandalized Howard's and was "proceeding down towards my House being the Custom house." Realizing that any appeal to government would be futile, Robinson abandoned his house and removed himself to the Cygnet, where he was soon joined by Wickham and Johnston. 25

The warnings were timely, for after their visit to Moffatt's the mob continued the search for the other men. "A large body of People tumultuously surrounded" Robinson's "armed with Clubs &c. and with great threats demanded the Person of his Majesty's Collector of the Customs." 26 They entered the house through the windows looking for Robinson, but were told by someone (possibly Wickham) that Robinson had escaped to the Cygnet. 27

The mob visited Robinson's first, which gave Johnston time to remove some of his furniture to a safer place. It was lucky for him that he did, for next "a set of Miscreants, who attended the Mob with the hopes of Plunder, entered my House and carried off a great part of my Goods." Johnston seems to have believed that the crowd actually consisted of at least

24. "Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765."
25. "Robinson to Commissioners of Customs, August 28, 1765."
27. Letter from John Robinson and John Nicoll to the Newport Mercury, September 9, 1765.
two groups, “Miscreants” intent on plunder and “the Mob” which was more interested in forcing the resignation of the Stamp Master and intimidating the other Tories.28

Sometime during this time span, the mob visited the house of John Nicoll, the Comptroller, and demanded that he give himself up as they had demanded the same of Robinson. But like Robinson, he had escaped to the Cygnet.29 The mob later would later return to Johnston’s, but whether peacefully or not was unclear to the potential victim.

“At about eleven at night,” the beleaguered stamp master wrote, “I was informed that the Mob were coming to my house and that some of them were urgent to speak with me.” Johnston left Lechmere’s and tried to intercept the crowd before they could get to his house, hoping that because he “had before been popular in the Town” he could “prevail upon them to desist.” But instead he was met some more temperate souls who “assured me that if I was seen by the Mob, they would oblige me to resign, or deprive me of my life, as many of them had threatened to do.”30

The mob did go to his house, and turned out to be largely peaceful. They “were stopt and parley’d with by a Gentleman who informed them that the house was not the property of Mr. Johnston; and being convinced of the truth thereof, they desisted, upon being treated with a quantity of liquor; but insisted that the Gentleman should deliver up Mr. Johnston’s effects the next day, which were then in the House, unless he resigned the Office he had been appointed to.”31 Having been assured that he would submit his resignation the next day, the crowd left without destroying any more of Johnston’s goods.32 However, they

28. “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”
29. Letter from John Robinson and John Nicoll to the Newport Mercury, September 9, 1765.
30. “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”
31. Boston Evening Post, September 2, 1765. The Connecticut Courant (New Haven, Conn.), September 2, 1765, reported that Johnston’s house “being under Mortgage, the person who held the Same appeared at the House with his Papers and Proofs, on examining of which were satisfied and quitted the house.”
32. Newport Mercury, September 2, 1765.
"denounced Vengeance" against Johnston and his friends "unless the promise made them was performed."\textsuperscript{33}  

This incident, combined with the largely nonviolent assaults on Robinson and Nicoll’s houses, strongly suggests that a second group of townspeople was visiting the crown officers’ houses, their intents different from those of the group that was concentrating on Howard’s and Moffatt’s and had perhaps made one attempt on Johnston’s. If there were only one crowd, it would have to be believed that a violent mob would plunder Johnston’s goods and then later, after draining Howard’s and Moffatt’s wine cellars, come back peacefully to parley. Even if this is at least possible, that mob would then (as we will see) have returned to its path of destruction at Howard’s and Moffatt’s. Instead, it makes sense that there was a second group, who accepted ceremonial drinks instead of enacting more violence, and followed norms of deference and respect while still asserting the people’s wish that Johnston resign. Perhaps a mob of seamen and other dispossessed persons attacked the houses and the goods of the Stamp Act supporters, playing out ritual forms of street theater and extralegal community formation while also leveling the material gap between themselves and two members of Newport’s social elite. At the same time, a group of elites (including Vernon, Ellery, and Crook) or their proxies (perhaps Samuel Crandall, who we know had a grudge against the commissioner of customs) visited the crown officers Johnston and Robinson to extract promises, using the mob as a threat. 

But the violent mob did return to Howard’s house around eleven o’clock, where they spent time “cleaving to bits all the doors and casements and tore up all the floors hearths and chimneys leaving the house a miserable shell only.”\textsuperscript{34} They soon moved on to Moffatt’s once again, repeating the process—destroying the house on the second trip after concentrating on the goods the first time around. By the stroke of midnight, Howard,

\textsuperscript{33} “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”

\textsuperscript{34} “Moffatt to Harrison, October 16, 1765,” 112.
Moffatt, and Johnston had all abandoned their houses and joined their fellows aboard the Cygnet. The mob’s depredations finally dwindled in the early morning, as they returned to Howard’s one last time and this time attacked the landscape around his house. They “concluded their triumphal victory,” wrote Moffatt with sarcasm, “by cutting down the locust trees which...were planted in front of his house.” They brought two trees down the hill to the parade ground below the Colony House and “Stuck them up in two Great Guns which have been fix’d at the Bottom of the Parade some Years as Posts.”

The riot itself was a complex event; since no one person seems to have seen the whole thing (and certainly no rioter wrote or published an account of the event), it remains impossible to do more than piece together the story from many different and conflicting accounts. The accounts of Moffatt, Johnston, and Robinson seem to be more complete and more reliable than the Mercury; the other newspapers do not contradict the Stamp Act supporters’ reports and in some cases give a fuller picture of the riot than did the Mercury. The Boston Evening Post is one example. The men under siege on the night of the 28th still had access to accurate information, as they stayed in Newport hiding out until about midnight and, even if they stayed away from the action themselves, had a string of first-hand

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35. “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”


37. “Almy to Story, August 29, 1765,” 236. Robert Blair St. George says that “The metaphoric connections [between houses and bodies] again surfaced when the contents of Martin Howard’s Newport house were themselves effigied on the parade ground just as if they were the disheveled components of a body. ‘And first they went to Martin Howard’s,’ a newspaper report revealed, ‘And Broke Every Window in his house Frames & all, Likewise Chairs Tables, Pictures & every thing which Stood before his door & Bro[ugh]t them & stuck them up on two Great Guns which have been fix’d at the Bottom of the Parade Some Years as Posts.’” [emphasis St. George]. St. George cites the Newport Mercury of August 26, 1765 as his source for this quote—interesting not least because the riot did not happen until the evening of the 28th. Blair St. George’s quote is a bastardized version of the description of the riot in the Boston Evening Post of September 2 and reprinted in the previously-cited Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society. The relevant portion reads in whole, “But last Night about Dusk they all Muster’d again, and first they went to Martin Howard’s, and Broke Every Window in his house Frames and all, likewise Chairs Tables, Pictures and every thing they cou’d come across. they also Saw’d down two Trees which Stood before his door and Bro’t them and Stuck them up in two Great Guns which have been fix’d at the Bottom of the Parade some years as Posts.” Blair St. George has misquoted the source; the crowd clearly only brought the trees down to the parade ground, not the rest of Howard’s goods.
reports from friends and sympathizers interested in their safety. The *Mercury* had access to
the same evidence, but its interpretation elides details to emphasize that the house attacks
were chaotic acts of destruction committed entirely by a disorganized mob. This spin on
events would also characterize the rest of the *Mercury*'s report.

The Stamp Act supporters’ accounts provide a better logic for the riots: though
sparked by the Crandall/Robinson confrontation, there were two groups with disparate
goals. There is no accurate information as to who made up each group, though the evidence
allows a reasonable guess based on how each party acted. One group—Johnston’s
“Miscreants”—was intent on violence and plunder; members of the lower reaches of the
disaffected, economically downtrodden seaman, artisan, and petty merchant groups, these
men would rally under the seaman John Webber in the next few days and threaten the
wealthy merchants as well as the suspicious proponents of imperial policy. The second group
was made up of the better sorts in society (though there was no doubt much overlap in the
middle ranks.) They were interested in enforcing Johnston’s resignation, though without
doing severe damage to the Attorney General they had elected. The plunder of Johnston’s
goods may or may not have been part of this plan. Moffatt believed that Vernon, Ellery, and
Crook were in the forefront of the rioters, disguised; they may very well have begun the
destruction of Howard’s and Moffatt’s before perhaps pursuing what they saw as the wider
interests of the community by going after Johnston. Since Robinson ran quickly to the
*Cygnet*, he was left to be dealt with the next day.

* * *

The next morning, as word of the previous evening’s destruction spread, Governor
Samuel Ward realized that it would be in his best interest to leave town; if he was thought to
approve of events, the Crown might hold him accountable for whatever happened next.
Accordingly, he packed up and made for his home on the Rhode Island mainland early on
Robinson and the other Stamp Act supporters had already realized that they could not rely on the colony’s government to protect them. But Ward’s quiet removal to his Westerly residence, thirty miles away on the Connecticut border, put to rest any chance that the tensions so violently revealed the previous night could be papered over. In leaving, Ward removed the sole authority that might have had the chance to mediate among the several factions: the Junto members and the Royal Navy, wealthy merchants, middling merchants and artisans, and the lower sort. The next several days, therefore, would see these groups playing for advantage in an uncertain environment. The methods they used would be derived from all the culturally charged forms of communication in colonial society: face-to-face relationships, spoken oaths, the public signing of documents, spontaneous oration, and the threat of more house attacks. Three separate performances played out simultaneously over the course of the 29th and 30th; though here for clarity’s sake they are treated separately, it is important to remember that Newporters were dealing with all three at once.

The first events concerned Augustus Johnston and the promise made on his behalf the night before that he would resign the office of Stamp Master. On the morning of the 29th, an unnamed “Gentleman,” at the request of some of Johnston’s friends who had stayed in town, came aboard the *Cygnet* to warn Johnston that his interests would best be served by resigning his office. Fearing for his and his “four sick children’s” lives, Johnston “signed a paper perporting [sic], that [he] would not accept the Office unless the Inhabitants of the Town consented thereto.” Johnston’s resignation was greeted with joy, according to the Mercury: “The Stamp-Master’s Resignation being publickly read, the People announced their Joy by repeated Huzza’s &c. and the Storm ceased.”


39. “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”

But Johnston, apparently, had no intention of obeying the mob's dictate; on board the *Cygnet*, he told Moffatt that signing the measure had only been a way to get the heat off him. The paper was just "an ambiguous ineffectual declaration in writing which implyd a resignation of the stamp office," according to Moffatt, "but as it had been extorted under the threatnings of ruin and destruction He never intended to observe or respect it but had given it to the Ringleaders only to sooth them into Quiet."\(^{41}\)

Any relief granted Newport by Johnston’s resignation would not hold for long. The mild-mannered minister of the Second Congregational Church, Ezra Stiles, examined the text of Johnston’s signed resignation and did not like what he saw. When the text was to be read to the gathered public, Stiles “came into the street,” and “declar’d the instrument of resignation artful base insufficient and harrangued upon its defects in form and method pointed out that there was no clause obligatory that it was not avouched and that notwithstanding of it Mr Johnson might execute the office.”\(^{42}\) Expressing deep frustration, Johnston wrote that the minister (despite being someone “who from his station in life better things might be expected,”) “said in a publick Manner, it was no resignation at all, and that I ought to be obliged to write to the Lords of the Treasury, that I would not accept of the Office.”\(^{43}\) And according to Leslie, Stiles told a crowd waiting expectantly for the public reading of the resignation, “Why! this paper is nothing! it will not do; by all that he says here, he may resume his office when he pleases; this is no attestation to it.” Perhaps Stiles was just warming up, but he was quickly stopped when “as he was going on inflaming the

\(^{41}\) “Moffatt to Harrison, October 16, 1765,” 113.

\(^{42}\) “Moffatt to Harrison, October 16, 1765,” 113. Moffatt's chronology suggests that the resignation was read on the 29th and Stiles gave his spontaneous performance on the 30th; however, Johnston’s narrative puts the two events on the same day. The *Connecticut Courant* of September 2 explicitly states that Johnston swore to his statement on the 29th and prints that oath as confirmed by a justice of the peace, providing support for Johnston’s chronology over Moffatt’s. The latter was also, it should be noted, writing a month and a half after the riot, while Johnston was writing within three days of it. See “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”

\(^{43}\) “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”
people ... one of the gentlemen of the town, named Brenton checked him by asking ‘How he could behave so unbecoming his function?’ Though Brenton reminded Stiles of his attempts to remain above the fray, it was too late; the people of Newport had been aroused.

Now Johnston again felt the wrath of the mob. Still waiting aboard the Cygnet, he received a message from the “Leaders of the Mob” demanding that he send a letter of resignation to the Treasury. His refusal to do so—again sent back by messenger—apparently induced the mob’s leaders to compromise; their next emissary suggested that if he “would Swear to that paper” he had already signed as being true, “that the Mob would be satisfied.” He complied “for the same reasons which induced me to sign it at first”—the threat of the mob against himself, his family, and his goods.

Thus, an extraordinary series of culturally defined events played out around Johnston’s resignation. The night before, a friend of Johnston’s had stood down the mob and promised the Stamp Master’s resignation the next day, while Johnston’s landlord had protected his property by exhibiting the legal papers that confirmed his ownership of the house. The next morning, face-to-face negotiations had secured a written and signed resignation; however, a learned expert in rhetoric and argument had declared that resignation “artful base and insufficient” in a spontaneous oratorical performance to the crowd. While Stiles’ speech was halted by one of Newport’s cultural elite who reminded him of his place in society as a mediator and observer, not an active participant, the crowd acted upon Stiles’ oration and demanded Johnston send a direct resignation to Britain. More negotiations allowed Johnston to save face by affirming under oath to the people that he would not take the position without their explicit permission. He was thus able to reintegrate himself into

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44. Two gentlemen named Brenton, brothers Jahleel and Samuel, are listed in Stiles’ “Stamp Act Notebook” as supporters of the Stamp Act; Samuel is marked as an especially vigorous supporter. Stiles, “Stamp Act Notebook,” 46.


46. “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”
the virtuous community as it was defined by those to whom the Stamp Act was the main concern—the elite merchants. And since the rest of the community had relatively little issue with Johnston, he had escaped harm for the moment.

So the controversy over Johnston’s position died down fairly quickly; no doubt the elite merchants, the ones protesting directly against the Stamp Act, were pleased to have their Attorney General back in the fold. Newporters then took steps to achieve other goals—control over crown officers’ fees and the release of the sloop Polly, slated for a smuggling trial in the Halifax vice-admiralty court but currently held in Newport harbor under the Cygnet’s protection. The man who took charge of these endeavors was Samuel Crandall, John Robinson’s old nemesis. Crandall may have been acting on his own, or he may have been a proxy of the merchant elite. The fact that he was apparently protected from prosecution later on suggests that the wealthy merchants at least looked with favor on his efforts. Thus, the same morning that Johnston’s friends sent a gentleman to see him aboard the Cygnet, Crandall, described by his nemesis as “a principal Fellow among the Mob,” sent Robinson a message that suggested that if the crown officers “would agree to receive our Fees according to their Will and Pleasure, and would also deliver up the Sloop Polly and her Cargo, now under Prosecution before Doctor Spry at Halifax, I might come on Shore in Safety, and rely on their Protection.”

Crandall may or may not have been bluffing about his power to damage Robinson. But Captain Leslie, at least, believed there was a plot afoot to recover the Polly as it sat under the Cygnet’s protection in Newport harbor. Leslie identified the plot with Crandall because he had also demanded the sloop’s return before the mob would allow Robinson ashore. The crowd, according to Leslie, planned to man and arm vessels in the harbor while also taking control of the fort on Goat Island that guarded the harbor. They would then send the

vessels in under cover of darkness to capture the sloop; if detected, they would fire on the
_Cygnet_ using the fort’s guns.48

The plot was believable, Leslie felt; after all, townsmen had fired from the fort on
the _St. John_ the year before, and no penalties had come from that. Further, he had received
messages from several trusted sources attesting to its veracity. “The Madness of the Mob,”
he wrote to Governor Ward, “may carry it to such lengths without the Government’s
intervention.” If the plan was enacted, Leslie warned Ward that he would fire on the fort
without hesitation, without regard to the possibility that the shot might carry over the fort
and into the town beyond. After all, such destruction would be small compared to the
possibility of imperial retaliation against Newport “on such an Enormous Thing being
committed in a British Colony.”49

Ward, in his reply, denied the existence of any plot and assured Leslie that as
governor he would “take proper Measures to prevent” any such attempt on the fort.50 Leslie
did not buy Ward’s assurances; he returned fire, saying “Idle as you may believe these
reports to be, they are well founded and were frequently repeated by some of the principal
People in the Town to me.” Leslie offered to provide Ward with evidence of the plot’s
existence, but apparently Ward never asked for this proof.51

The stalemate between Newport and the Crown continued until September 2, when
Governor Ward decided to provide “5 or 6 civil officers” as protection for Robinson,
thereby allowing him to come ashore (without having the _Polly_ released first) and resume his
duties as the customs officer. The return of Ward’s authority seems to have dimmed the

48. “Charles Leslie to Samuel Ward, September 1, 1765,” Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442, Public

49. “Leslie to Ward, September 1, 1765.”

50. “Samuel Ward to Charles Leslie, September 1, 1765,” Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442, Public

51. “Charles Leslie to Samuel Ward, September 2, 1765,” Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442, Public
rebellious enthusiasms of Crandall and his allies, as no further action towards recapturing the *Polly* was reported. However, Ward did not go so far as to offer up Crandall to the authorities. When Robinson tried to have Crandall arrested, he found that “the Magistrate’s Warrant was returned by the high Sheriff as impossible to be executed under Peril of his Life, So that I consider this an end of the Prosecution for Want of Government, there being here an absolute Suspension.”

Leslie did not specify who his “trusted sources” were; since he personally respected his sources, it is likely that they were men of some standing in town, perhaps wealthy merchants not at the forefront of Stamp Act resistance such as Godfrey Malbone, Jr. Having already tried to settle the mob once, when Stiles challenged Johnston’s resignation, Malbone represented this group most likely to desire the restoration of the pre-riot order. But the merchants leading the protests did not offer up the loyal Samuel Crandall as a scapegoat—a benefice denied to another of the men at the forefront of the mob.

Indeed, the merchants resisting the Stamp Act themselves were fearful of another riot, only not one led by Samuel Crandall, but one led by the young seaman John Webber. Unlike Crandall, Webber was not particularly concerned with the customs service, but with the gulf that remained between high and low despite the previous night’s communal activity. When he acted with similar presumption towards the men who had planned the events of the previous two days as he had towards Howard and Moffatt, Webber exposed the social conflict that still divided Newport in the face of its supposed unity.

On the afternoon of the 29th, Webber was “Insolent to several Persons,” wrote Johnston, “some of whom were the very people concerned in beginning the Riot, by preparing the Effigies &c, and now began to fear for themselves.” These men “were weak enough to imagine that if they could secure this Fellow, who had exerted himself a good deal

52. “Robinson to Commissioners of Customs, September 5, 1765.”
in the Disturbances — That it would somehow atone for the part they had acted.” With the assistance of sheriff Gideon Wanton, the ringleaders seized Webber and “carried him on board the Cygnet Man of War, he exclaiming that he was betrayed by the very persons who set him to work.” But seeing a seaman forcibly carried onto a ship of the Royal Navy invoked the fear of impressment among the common people of Newport’s maritime community:

His being carried on board soon raised a very large Number of people together, who threatened that unless the Man was brought on shore immediately, they would destroy the Houses of those persons, who had seized him — this occasion’d some of them to go on board, and by telling Capt. Leslie that he was the wrong Man, and that the Authority in the Town were in Pursuit of the Ringleader, and that as soon as he was taken, he should be sent on board, Capt. Leslie thus deceived permitted the fellow to go on shore.

After discovering he had been fooled, Leslie realized the seriousness of the elite merchants’ situation. “A Gentleman told me who heard one of the leaders say it,” he passed on to Colville, “that there were two hundred Men appointed to board the Cygnet in case the Man who the Sherif brought on board was not given up.” The real planners of the riot, he realized, had used Webber to head the mob, and then turned on him “to mask their own villainy.” In return, the mob “turned on those who had set them on, and were going to tear their houses down, and the Sheriff’s.” But once Wanton had negotiated for Webber’s release and had brought him off the ship, Webber

53. “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”
54. “Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765.”
insulted them all, and threatened their houses. They begged and prayed him to be satisfied, gave him money, and ordered him clothes, and everything he would have. The Sheriff was so abject as to say to him, 'What would you have of me? I will do everything to satisfy you; I will lay myself down, and let you tread on my neck, if that will give you satisfaction.' ... Mr. Godfrey Molburn, jun.\textsuperscript{56} and other gentlemen of the town, at last offered to take matters into their own hands, and oppose force to force, if the rioters would not disperse by persuasion. They succeeded in getting the rioters to go quietly to their homes by the latter method.\textsuperscript{57}

Webber's challenge to the deference expected by the merchant elite thus exposed not simply the social divisions in Newport, but the methods to which different groups would resort to in a time of stress. Webber violated the rules of deference in speaking "insolently" to members of the elite. Though this might have been tolerated in the ritual play of the previous evening, the merchants could not allow it to continue. In response to their forcing Webber on board the \textit{Cygnet}, the crowd displayed their anger by threatening the merchants' material possessions—thus drawing a parallel between the merchants and the Stamp Act supporters as both acting in disharmony with the community's wishes.

To defend themselves, the elite merchants resorted to a very different set of actions. They traded on their status as gentlemen to persuade Leslie to allow them to remove Webber from the ship. But then, to placate Webber and the crowd, they had to appear to bend to the community's will. The merchants showered Webber with material goods and sheriff Gideon Wanton submitted to a humiliating ritual that inverted the traditional order of deference—the sheriff of Newport County had to offer to submit publicly to a common

\textsuperscript{56. Godfrey Malbone, one of Newport's wealthiest merchants and listed in Ezra Stiles' "Stamp Act Notebook" as a fencesitter regarding enforcement of the Stamp Act, having "Strong Connexions" to the pro-enforcement side. Stiles, "Stamp Act Notebook," 46.}

\textsuperscript{57. Calendar of Home Office Papers of the Reign of George III, 1760–1765, 610-11.}
seaman. Only after acceding to the crowd's wishes were they restored to their traditional spot in the community and thus able to persuade the townspeople to disperse.

The next day Webber pushed his luck. He met with Johnston by chance in the street, and "he being very Insolent to me," wrote Johnston, "I apprehended him; and carried him to Goal where he now remains." Webber, however, was not content to sit quietly in jail; he threatened to turn informant on the elite merchants who had betrayed him. "They have now got him into jail," wrote the Cygnet's captain, "but it is said he must be let out again for want of a Prosecutor. He has been asked for his Evidence but will not give any because says he, very wisely, I shall be tore to pieces by those who set me on but if my Person can be secured I will say what I know." Leslie—who was clearly not the smartest man ever to serve in the Royal Navy—told Johnston that if they could get Webber on board the Cygnet, Leslie could protect him from the gentlemen of Newport. The jail was near the center of town and any attempt to move him onto the Cygnet would have been quickly detectable, so there was little need for instant action on Webber's friends part to protect him. Thus, Webber would remain in Newport jail; one wonders exactly what Sheriff Wanton said and did to the young seaman now that he no longer needed to offer Webber his neck.

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The events surrounding the riot of the 28th can be viewed as a set of cultural forms invoked to play out meanings of community among the various social groups of the town. Together, the different forms of performance—parades and effigies, house attacks, spontaneous oratory, and personal, face-to-face communication—became the Stamp Act crisis in Newport. But the stories of these events would be spread around the Atlantic world by the printed word—tellings and retellings that were already interpretations, and always

58. "Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765."

59. "Leslie to Colville, September 5, 1765."

from a particular point of view. The *Newport Mercury*, a newspaper already committed to resisting the Stamp Act, would publish such an account. Publisher Samuel Hall earlier in the year had ceased to print Howard and Moffatt’s letters; now the paper became a mouthpiece for the elite merchants and their views. Its description of the riot can be seen as itself a performance—a text that emphasized the peaceful nature of the effigy-hanging, the violence of the riot, and the unruly danger of the mob afterwards in the person of “our Masianello,” John Webber. Its hero was Augustus Johnston (himself supported by the gentlemen of the town) and its villain was Webber. Conversely, the *Mercury* neglected the role of the elite merchants, or of any specific group, in the riot itself. The intricacies of Johnston’s resignation, including Stiles’ performance, were absent, as were Crandall’s negotiations with Robinson and the plot against the *Polly*.

Unlike Moffatt’s, the *Mercury*’s report of the effigy-hanging was impersonal: none of the participants were mentioned by name. Like the “muffled big coats [and] flappd hats” worn by ringleaders Vernon, Ellery, and Crook, this practice served to distance the virtuous action of the people from the personal identities of any of its participants. This saintly tone was affirmed by the *Mercury*’s emphasis, “The whole was conducted with Moderation, and no Violence offered to the Persons or Property of any Man.” The moderate dissent of Newport’s people was emphasized by a paragraph on the town meeting that took place simultaneously with the effigy-hanging: “The Town also chose a Committee to prepare Instructions for their Deputies relative to the Stamp Act.”

The *Mercury* took pains to show that the effigy-hanging was peaceful; in contrast, it emphasized the violence and chaos of the next night’s riot. Its narrative of the riot largely corresponded to other accounts. However, it stressed that the riot came about as a result of a happenstance meeting between two people, mentioning neither Robinson nor Crandall by

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60. “Moffatt to Harrison, October 16, 1765,” 112.

name. The *Mercury* focused on the violence of the riot, “Mischief” at Howard’s followed by an attack with “reddoubled Fury,” and then another attack on Moffatt’s. Indeed, the *Mercury* was the only source to mention that Moffatt did not own but instead rented his house. Whether true or not, the claim served to emphasize the brutality of the attack, for the mob did not confine itself to damaging his belongings, but also “committed Outrages equally terrible” to those at Howard’s, “in tearing the House to Pieces.”\(^\text{62}\) The *Mercury*, by emphasizing the violence of the riot and its happenstance beginnings, hoped to distance the community and its leaders (who had acted in peaceful dissent the day before) from the evils committed by the mob.

In the *Mercury’s* account, Johnston’s resignation went without a hitch: “Next Morning the Stamp Master’s Resignation being publickly read, the People announced their Joy by repeated Huzza’s &c and the Storm ceased.” The well-liked minister Ezra Stiles was thereby rendered invisible and thus protected as had been the elite merchants. This orderly performance marked a turning point in the *Mercury’s* narrative: the vanquished, the villain Johnston exited the stage, to return later as a hero. Instead, the rest of the piece is about the machinations of the mob leader Webber.\(^\text{63}\)

“An Irish young Fellow, who had been but a few Days in the Town, stood forth, like Masaniello\(^\text{64}\), openly declared that he was at the Head of the Mob the preceding Night, and triumphed in the Mischief that was done.” Webber, in this version, was not being insolent towards the gentlemen; he was marking himself as a criminal. The merchants took the opportunity, first, to exonerate themselves from the criminal brutality of Webber and those

\(^{62}\) Newport *Mercury*, September 2, 1765.

\(^{63}\) Newport *Mercury*, September 2, 1765. The *Mercury* later corrected Webber’s ethnicity, printing on September 9 that “we since hear he is a native of England.”

\(^{64}\) See Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 112-16, for the story of Masianello. He was a Neapolitan fisherman who led a mob that took over the city for two weeks in 1647 and turned the town’s hierarchy upside down. His reign was memorialized in a play, *The Rebellion of Naples* (1649), and the name Masianello became a watchword among the European intelligentsia for the leaders of lower-class insurrections.
who followed him, and, second, to portray themselves as the protectors of order. When Webber began to proclaim his leadership of the mob, “Some Gentlemen; to prevent any further Evil, thought it best to seize immediately upon this Desperadoe, and put him on board the Man of War, which they accordingly did.” The *Mercury* neglected to mention that Webber implicated these merchants as his employers of the previous night.65

“But [Webber’s taking], instead of kindling the desired Purpose, kindled a new Fire,” continued the *Mercury*. “The Mob began again to collect; and a Number of Persons, who, it seemed, were not before concerned, were so irritated at his being carried on board the Man of War, that it became necessary to bring him on Shore again. This was done; and upon his promising immediately to quit the Government, he was released, and the Night passed without any Tumult.” Here, the writer excised action and drama from the event: the reaction to Webber’s taking and his subsequent removal from the *Cygnet* was passed off casually, with Webber himself bent in submission to the hierarchy. Instead of threatening the merchants of the town and forcing sheriff Gideon Wanton to bow in subjection, the *Mercury*’s Webber promised to leave Newport.66

The *Mercury* reported that Webber tried to raise the mob again the next day, but with less success. “Masaniello appeared again in the public Streets, boldly declaring himself to have been the Ringleader of the Mob, and threatening Destruction to the Town, more particularly to the Persons and Houses of those who seized him the preceding Day, unless they made him Presents agreeable to his Demands.” In the *Mercury*’s narrative, Webber had sworn to leave town, and then betrayed his promise; thus the merchants in the *Mercury* story were now justified in taking him when he reasserted himself on the morning of the 30th. And since Johnston had resigned the office of Stamp Master and has thus returned to the community (as defined by the elite), he too was now eligible for praise. “The Attorney-


General, who was the late Stamp-Master, being met and insulted by [Webber], heroically seized upon him; and some Gentlemen running to his assistance, they carried him off to Goal."

So the *Mercury* promoted both Johnston and the “Gentlemen” of the town as virtuous, law-abiding citizens, opposed to the disorderly conduct of Webber and the mob. The newspaper concluded its report on these unfortunate events with evident relief, “Nobody appeared to rescue him, nor to say a Word in his favor. He is now under Confinement;—the Town is again at Peace, and we sincerely wish it may continue so.”

The *Mercury*’s version of events was fully intended to reach a larger audience than the people of Newport. The elite merchants and other resisters to the Stamp Act, including publisher Samuel Hall, realized that the literate elites across the colonies and in Britain would read in newspapers about the Newport riot as Newporters had read about the earlier Boston house attacks. The protestors against imperial policy therefore realized that they needed to put their interpretation in front of the public. The *Mercury* itself would be distributed (if sparsely) across the colonies. It was possible that another newspaper would reprint the *Mercury*’s account. Thus, Newport’s elite tried to counter the other reports that surely would appear in print or that might be spread through letters and face-to-face communications. Though the *Mercury*’s report was no more or less a version from a particular perspective than Johnston or Robinson’s letters, it is particularly interesting to follow because it illustrates the way in which control of print allowed some influence over the dissemination of information, similar to the paper’s previous silencing of Howard and Moffatt (see chapter 1) and, later, its report of a mock funeral for “Liberty” on the day the Stamp Act was to be enforced (see p.83).


68. *Newport Mercury*, September 2, 1765.
By the time Johnston hauled Webber off to jail, Newport for several days had been "in the entire Possession of a Mob...headed by a Vagabond who led them to whose House he thought proper". The town settled down after Ward returned on the first of September, at least symbolically signalling that authority would now be imposed. Johnston had publicly affirmed his resignation; Webber was safely imprisoned; on the 31st Howard and Moffatt had abandoned Newport and sailed for England; and perhaps the alcohol from their wine cellars had finally been disposed of. Still, there remained rumblings of discontent throughout the town.

Commissioner of Customs John Robinson and Comptroller John Nicoll were convinced that, contrary to the *Mercury’s* report of events, the riot and its aftermath had not simply been a case of aroused townspeople, primed by an effigy-hanging the night before to attack houses. Instead, they believed that the merchants, looking for such an opportunity, had used Crandall’s attack on Robinson as an excuse to incite the riot. Therefore, in a signed letter to the *Mercury*, they invoked British law providing for the punishment of persons who attacked or hindered Crown officers in the course of their duties. The statute provided, as Robinson read it, a provision that allowed for the release of a captive providing he “shall discover the Persons who set him on Work.” Thus, Robinson hoped, the small fishes would lead him to the great whales. Robinson offered a £100 reward for the capture of rioters, with the exceptions of Crandall, Webber, and "all Negroes." Webber was already in jail, any blacks would likely have been slaves, and Robinson had already realized that it would be impossible to arrest Crandall.

Perhaps instigated by pressure from the *Cygnet*’s Captain Leslie and by the Collector of Customs’ call for the capture of the rioters, Governor Ward published a letter in the

69. “Leslie to Colville, September 5, 1765.”

70. *Newport Mercury*, September 9, 1765.
Mercury the next week calling for all government officials and Crown officers to assist in capturing the rioters and to help prevent any more disturbances from arising. If the proclamation helped Ward to appear virtuous in the eyes of British officials, it did nothing to help bring rioters before the court—only John Webber was ever prosecuted.71

Tension again mounted as the November 1 enforcement of the Stamp Act drew nearer. A brief war of words took place between Johnston and citizens of Newport, conducted both on the pages of the Mercury and in anonymous pieces posted at the Swing-bridge (a drawbridge on the Long Wharf that allowed access to the “Cove,” the northmost part of Newport harbor.) Standing a few hundred feet west of the Parade, it was itself a very visible and public place.72

The stamped papers for Newport had arrived in Boston in late September. Not knowing what else to do, Johnston had them placed aboard the safest place he could think of—the Cygnet. Word spread in Newport that the papers had arrived, and fearing that Johnston would renege on his oath and execute the office, someone posted an anonymous broadside on the Swing-bridge on the night of Saturday, October 19. It threatened Johnston’s life if he tried to execute the office and warned Robinson and merchants of the wrath of the “respectable populace.” If Robinson tried to use stamps, he would feel the “pain of our highest displeasure”; if he refused to clear vessels using unstamped paper, he would “be drove out of town with a high hand”; if merchants tried to clear vessels using stamped paper, they would also “meet with our highest displeasure.”73

Johnston replied with a signed letter in the Mercury, finding himself “under necessity of appearing in print, a thing I hoped I should never be obliged to do.” He reviewed the past

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71. Newport Mercury, September 16, 1765.

72. The Swing-bridge may have acted as a sort of community bulletin board, an alternative to the newspaper, perhaps primarily used by the lower and lower-middle classes. Unfortunately, I have found no other references to the bridge as a bulletin board or clues as to which social groups might have used it.

73. Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 156-57.
few months, argued that he had always been opposed to the Stamp Act, but that to secure his bondsmen in London who had put up £2000 against the stamps, he was forced to not abandon them but to allow them to be brought to Newport harbor and placed on board the Cygnet—where, he assured the townspeople, they would stay.74

By the next week a new piece had replaced the original on the Swing-bridge, the first having been pulled down by a “sacrilegious Hand.” The writer, signing himself “RHODE ISLAND” rejected Johnston’s equivocations and ordered him in the name of “THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE” to “take the accursed Papers from on board the Cygnet, and put them on board the first Vessel bound to any part of Great Britain, and ship them to —— ————. If he doth not this, let him abide the Event, for mental Evasions and Equivocations we will not put up with.”75

One riot had already spun out of the control of Newport’s elite; they wanted to make sure, not only that a second riot did not take place (as the pieces at the Swing-bridge threatened), but that they were seen across the empire as staunch yet peaceful opponents of the Stamp Act. Fortunately for them, there was a perfect excuse to clear the town of seamen: the merchants needed to get as many ships as possible to sea before the first of November, when stamped papers would theoretically be needed to clear all shipping. Thus, by sending out all their sloops and brigs and schooners in the last days of October, the elite merchants successfully evaded the Stamp Act and removed the most volatile portion of the populace at once.76 This gave them the breathing space to hold a dramatic performance of their own on November 1, one that would be tightly controlled, nonviolent, and news of which would be spread to the world through the helpful mouthpiece of the Newport Mercury.

74. Newport Mercury, October 21, 1765.
75. Newport Mercury, October 28, 1765.
76. On the sudden rash of clearances, see Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 156-58, especially 156, n.13.
So the final words in the telling of Newport’s Stamp Act riot were spoken, not unexpectedly, by the elite merchants and their friends who controlled the *Newport Mercury*. On November 1, the paper reported, the town had held a well-organized procession to demonstrate its opposition to the Stamp Act. The demonstration took the form of a funeral procession for “Liberty,” in which “summon’d by Death’s clanking Knell, the Funeral began to move at 12 o’Clock, from the Crown Coffee-House, towards the Burying Ground.—The Concourse of Mourners and Spectators was prodigious, consisting of Persons of all Ranks, from the highest even down to the Blacks, who seem’d, from a Sense of their Masters Suffering, to join the Mourning Course.” At the burial ground, as onlookers and a Son of Liberty wailed over “Glorious LIBERTY’s” death, they discovered that the victim was not dead, for “the Goddess Britania had order’d a Guardian Angel to snatch Old FREEDOM from the Jaws of frozen Death to the Orb of the reviving Sun.” Afterwards, “The Afternoon was spent in Rejoycing, and Bells ringing—The Court-House was ornamented with the Ensigns of Loyalty” and the assembled sang a song in praise of freedom and George III.77

The bombastic description was accompanied by a letter that put the elite merchants’ “spin” on the demonstration. Its anonymous author applauded “the Decency with which the FUNERAL OF LIBERTY was conducted,” as giving “the strongest Assurance, of your manly, sensible Behavior on any future, public Exhibition.” The peaceful procession worked better than any number of violent riots, for “it is alone from a calm, steady, determined Opposition to [the Stamp Act], that we can expect any Advantage. ... If we should behave ourselves like Madmen, we must expect to be treated as such;—but if, by conducting ourselves like Men under the Direction of Reason, we shew the World, that we oppose the Act because we look upon it to be cruel, unjust, and oppressive, the Wisdom of Parliament will doubtless attend and pay a regard to our deliberate, rational, constant Opposition, and grant us that Redress which the Justice of our Cause gives us the greatest Reason to expect.”

77. *Newport Mercury*, November 4, 1765.
The two pieces together worked, first, to identify the Newport elite with peaceful
demonstrations; second, they served to tie together an imagined Newport community that
included "Persons of all Ranks, from the highest even down to the Blacks." Thus, the
Mercury presented an idealized picture of Newport, healed of the rifts which spurious reports
from sources other than the Mercury might have indicated existed. This was a continuation of
the Mercury's damage-control policy after the riot: making the riot seem entirely the work of a
disaffected lower class and disengaging the elite from all but the peaceful effigy-hanging.

In the same issue, the Mercury reported another, darker, event of the previous week.
In describing the unsuccessful attempt to free John Webber from prison, the editor intended
to show that the community was again unified against the Stamp Act and that the lawless
elements were now small and ineffective. Inadvertently, however, the story revealed the
social rifts that still divided Newport.

In the week leading up to November 1, anonymous "threatening letters were
dropped at the Door of Joseph G. Wanton, Esq., High Sherifff of this County." The letters
reprised the threats of late August: if Webber was not released, they would "effect his
Release by Violence" and also might destroy Wanton's house. The men's determination to
rescue their fellow might have been increased by hearing that on Friday, Webber had
attempted to hang himself in his cell. A vigorous patrol on Friday night prevented any
violence, but Saturday night saw "20 or 30 Men" surround the jail in an effort to release
Webber. They dispersed when the alarm was given, but two "said to be the Ringleaders"
were captured and themselves thrown in jail.

The Mercury expressed astonishment that any of the proper persuasion would want to
threaten the whiggish Wanton: "That Mr. Wanton's Property should be threaten'd with
Injury, by these abandoned Villains, is very extraordinary, as no Person is more zealous in

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78. Newport Mercury, November 4, 1765.
79. Newport Mercury, November 4, 1765.
defending the Rights of his Country than he, and consequently detests and abhors Stamp Act Projectors and Abettors of all Kinds. It is therefore presumed, that the Inhabitants of the Town will manifest a due Resentment on his Behalf.” The *Mercury*’s report neatly elided the fact that many of the lower sorts in the town were far less interested in the Stamp Act than in economic deprivation and arbitrary justice, the latter often exerted by the Royal Navy, but in this case being used by the colony’s elite to save themselves by making a scapegoat of Webber. 

Instead, the *Mercury* portrayed Webber’s rescuers as deluded; regrettably, by their actions, they had proved themselves no true friends to liberty as had the peaceful demonstrators of November 1. 

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80. Webber would remain the scapegoat; he would be convicted in November of attacking Howard and Moffatt’s houses, the only person ever so charged. He was convicted in a separate case for stealing a silver watch from an innkeeper. In this second case, his indictment was signed by the innkeeper’s lawyer—Augustus Johnston. See the General Sessions of the Peace Record Book, Newport County, November 1765 (Rhode Island State Court Archives, Pawtucket, RI), 127, and the Inferior Court of Common Pleas Record Book, Newport County, Volume G, November 1765 (Rhode Island State Court Archives, Pawtucket, RI), 505.

CHAPTER 3
“A PUBLIC PRECEDENT TO THE WORLD”:
THE STRUGGLE REMEMBERED

Ezra Stiles, minister of the Second Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, began his “Stamp Act Notebook” in July of 1765. At the time he had no idea of what was to follow—the riot of late August, the growing unrest of the population over British policy, the final repeal of the hated Stamp Act in the spring of 1766, or the events that would lead to rebellion in the decade to come. But the composition of the “Stamp Act Notebook” represents an important turning point in Stiles’s conception of American identity and America’s place in the world-historical setting. Stiles used the document as a repository of his thoughts as he struggled to define a new community in the colonies. Fed by an awareness of British and colonial history as filtered through a Whig viewpoint, he explored the implications of the Stamp Act as an instrument of tyranny. And after repeal, he became a sort of chronicler of the resistance, celebrating the patriots who stood against the Stamp Act and recording for posterity the names of those who were in favor of it. Both British politicians and American officials and private citizens found themselves indicted by Stiles in the pages of the “Stamp Act Notebook.” By the time he stopped writing in the notebook sometime in 1767, the colonies were in the midst of a short economic boom and the immediate threat of British tyranny had receded. The details he recorded reflect the petty infighting of a resistance movement whose members now had no one to fight except each
The "Stamp Act Notebook", first and foremost, is a history—a chronicle of a period of American history that Stiles saw as extraordinarily important. It was written in three stages: in July 1765, when panic over the impending enforcement of the Stamp Act was reaching a fever pitch across the colonies; in the spring and summer of 1766, after the Act had been repealed and the colonists had celebrated their deliverance; and in the spring of 1767, when life had returned to its normal, pre-Stamp Act routines. In the earliest part, a furious Stiles penned a long history of British corruption, especially as it related to the American colonies over the previous century and a half. The second part consists of a journal of news and rumors of the repeal as it reached the colonies in March-May 1766 and a retrospective chronicle of events during the crisis of the previous year. The third part of the "Notebook" is also in two sections: a detailed description of the infighting among the Newport Sons of Liberty as they planned the celebration for the first anniversary of the repeal, and a chronicle of the anniversary celebrations in Newport and across the colonies.

The "Stamp Act Notebook" is hardly a complete, ordered, refined literary text. It is instead a compendium of many different styles and forms of writing, composed at different times without a view toward consistency. But together, these disparate elements of the "Stamp Act Notebook" can be read as a single document in which Stiles chose to record certain ideas and events (instead of, or in addition to, recording them in one of his many other books, diaries, and letters.) The inconsistencies throughout the "Notebook" reveal Stiles's struggle to create a coherent history of the virtuous community as it combated the

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forces of corruption. He describes the virtuous community as unified in the time of greatest
fear and as showing fissures in the time of the repeal. By the time of repeal anniversary
celebrations of 1767, the old virtuous community had devolved: its members were now
concerned with local interests and factional wrangling rather than in joining together to
defend against corruption.

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The first section of the “Stamp Act Notebook” is a history of the colonies: written
not as a narrative, but in the form of an inscription to be engraved upon a columnar
monument. As such, it represented the publication of community feeling in a public space,
visible to all—similar in function to the way in which Newporters used the Swing-bridge, if
more imposing in form (see chapter 2).

Such a monument, had it been built of stone and mortar and not words, would have
had to be exceptionally tall—the inscription ran for seventeen pages. Nevertheless, any
imagined spatial limitations did not deter Stiles from composing an extensive if particular
history of the relationship between the British colonies and their mother country. In the
earliest section of the “Stamp Act Notebook”, the line of division between virtue and
corruption that Stiles drew was geographical in nature: the virtuous community was
“American,” as defined in opposition to “European.”

This history can be divided into three portions. The first concerns political history:
the settlement of the colonies, interspersed by the recurrent attempts by Britain to impose its
will on the American provinces for its own benefit. The second is a demographic history of
the colonies: how they were settled and the number of people who settled there. The last
several pages turn to the events since the Peace of Paris in 1763, chronicling the unjust taxes
and regulations imposed on the colonists and the brutal actions of the Royal Navy and
customs officers charged with enforcing those edicts.
The columnar inscription begins with the most fervent passage in the entire notebook. The lines are centered on the page as they might be if engraved line-by-line on a gigantic obelisk. Beginning with the voyages of John Smith and the Pilgrims, Stiles's history sweeps across the expanse of colonial experience until the time at which he wrote—July 17, 1765. The first few lines give a sense of the whole:

This Column is erected AD 1765
The fatal Year
Which commences the Era
of American Slavery
And Subjugation to Great Britain.²

In the rest of the inscription Stiles set out to answer the question of why 1765 “commences the Era of American Slavery.” He listed examples of how corruption had threatened the colonies in the seventeenth century—and how, each time, corruption had been overcome. Charles I had “Arbitrarily annuled / All former grants” to the colonists in 1635 but was defeated by Oliver Cromwell.³ But Charles II continued the assault on the colonies, creating the Court of Commissioners in Boston in 1665 and eventually revoking the New England charters while “New England groaned under the Oppression” of “the first Tyrannical Governor / In the Colonies,” Edmund Andros. But almost (in Stiles’s mind) as a reward for America’s virtuous behavior in rising against Andros, “King William III of glorious memory” ascended the throne, and “was the second Sovereign / Who proved a

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Friend to America.” The House of Hanover helped to avert all designs against the colonies, until George III was coronated in 1760.⁴

Here Stiles’s narrative became much more detailed, and the theme shifted to the competition of ministerial influences. “That illustrious Minister / The Rt. Honorable William Pitt Esq” was Stiles’s hero, while the Earl of Bute was his villain. Pitt achieved a return to power in time to win the Seven Years’ War, which Bute had almost lost for Britain. But Bute regained influence and gave away many of the conquests that Pitt had achieved, notably those in the Caribbean. If Britain had held onto these conquests, Stiles argued, “they might have been held in Deposit / To discharge the Accretion of Debt — / — yet glorious to ‘America by extending the / Bounds of the British Provinces / To the Mississippi & the Pole.” In other words, if Pitt and not Bute had been in charge after the war then Britain would not have been in financial trouble and the Stamp Act would have been rendered wholly unnecessary. Thus the present woes of the colonies could be traced directly to ministerial corruption.⁵

Stiles began the second section of the inscription with the Spanish settlement of the “tropical regions” but quickly shifted his attention to the English colonists. He emphasized the settlers’ various motives, clearly sympathizing with those who came to the New World for religious reasons—the Pilgrims and the Puritans. Maryland’s Catholics, the conquest of Dutch New York, New Jersey, the Carolinas, and Pennsylvania were in contrast catalogued and then dismissed. By the 1730s and 40s Georgia and Nova Scotia were separate English colonies as well. Stiles estimated that by 1760 a total of 117,000 white settlers had come to the British colonies, fully 60,000 to Pennsylvania alone, “many of which / Passed into Frontiers of / Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina.”⁶

This jaunt into demographic history seems out of place in what is otherwise a heated attack on British corruption. But Stiles had his reasons: first, it was a fascination of Stiles's that he would continue with when he returned to the “Stamp Act Notebook” in the spring and summer of 1766. Secondly, this section of the inscription allowed him to carve out a special place for the Puritans who settled New England—and for their descendants. “Of all the Colonies none have / Been considered with more Contempt / By their Mother Country / Than those in New England / For no other Reason / Than because they were Puritans: / Besides they settled themselves / Without any aid from the crown.” In Stiles’s mind, the Puritans and their Congregationalist descendants had been the leaders of the resistance movement in both the past and in the present. “And better forever better,” he believed, “To be for ever abandoned by England / Than from Sons to become Slaves.” Although Stiles was beginning to conceive of the colonies as unified in opposition to British corruption, the Congregationalists were unquestionably the rightful leaders of the resistance.7

Overseas ministers were not the only form of British corruption. Indeed, for Stiles, the corruption of British officers during the Seven Years’ War was a major cause of America’s present problems. The British treated the Americans with contempt and, returning to Britain, declared that the colonists could easily sustain taxes. Bute and the ministry, unpopular even in Britain, leaped at this scheme which was supported by the British people. Also, the British “affected to be alarmed / With the Growth population & natural Increase / Of American Provinces, / Where the people double every twenty years.” At this rate the population would increase beyond that of Britain in a century, and the officers and ministry “imagined & believed a Revolt / As firmly as if they saw it.” Thus,

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7. Stiles, “Stamp Act Notebook,” 15. Stiles believed that demographic history was a “systematic branch of philosophy”; he studied it vigorously, and his calculations indicated that Congregationalists were destined to continue their numerical dominance over Anglicans in New England and to spread into the interior of the continent, where the Indians were steadily (and conveniently) disappearing. See Grasso, A Speaking Aristocracy, 255-56.
demographic history was important to Stiles because the colonies' growth was seen as a threat to British supremacy.8

The ministry began their machinations in 1764. "They stationed Twenty Ships of War / Along the Maritime Coast / Of North America / To keep in pay a Number of Sycophants / And Scotch Dependents, / But under pretext of breaking up / The Trade for French Molasses." Like the army officers during the Seven Years' War, the Royal Navy treated the Americans without the respect Stiles felt was due fellow subjects of the Crown. "Be it remembered by Posterity that / These Ships of War behaved with / The most haughty Insolence / To the King's American Subjects."9

A series of taxes brought the ire of the colonists as well. They particularly protested against the proposed Stamp Act. It was, they argued, "Inconsistent with the British Constitution / To tax us without our Consent / As we had no Representatives in Parliament / And to have such there would be inconvenient." One and a half million Americans felt betrayed when Parliament refused even to hear their petitions. Only "COLONEL BARRY / And a few other members only / Adventured to speak a word in our Behalf / Be his Memory honored / Thro all American ages." The Stamp Act passed and was given the royal assent, "Which Sealed the Loss of American Liberty / Diffused a Disgust thro the Colonies / And laid the Basis of an Alienation / Which will never be healed. / Henceforth the European & American Interests / Are separated / Never more to be joyned."10

The style of the last few lines echoed that of the beginning. The inscription reflected the despair that Stiles saw and felt as corruption reached across the Atlantic. Stiles viewed the opposition as one between British and American interests, interests that are unreconcilable because the colonies are on a different continent than the mother country.

Further, despair had turned into passivity. The colonies were being *acted upon* by Britain; they could do little in their own defense. Protests had been entirely ignored and there was, apparently, no other recourse. Rather than standing as a celebratory memorial, Stiles's imagined column marked the final resting place of American liberty. It would have been best placed in a graveyard rather than in front of a courthouse—in fact, it would have been an appropriate monument in Newport's funeral for “Liberty,” held to mark the date of the enforcement of the Stamp Act (see chapter 2).

* *
* * *

Stiles put down the “Stamp Act Notebook” for almost a year after July of 1765. In the meantime a great deal happened: riots broke out across the colonies, the Stamp Act was imposed in November, and by March rumors abounded that Parliament was about to repeal the hated law. By the time Stiles took up the “Stamp Act Notebook” again in March of 1766, these rumors were rampant and the colonies had begun to hope again. The virtuous community was on the brink of a victory over the forces of corruption, but rifts among the English peoples of the Americas had become apparent.

When Stiles began writing in the “Stamp Act Notebook” again it was because rumors were flying that Parliament was soon to repeal, or had already repealed, the Stamp Act. On March 27, 1766, Stiles began to record the news and rumors he was hearing. He penned entries retroactively for the dates between January 12 and March 27, perhaps relying on newspapers and other notes. As well as he could, he tried to determine the source of each rumor—was it from a ship directly from Britain, or second- or third-hand through the West Indies? As he began writing, Stiles concluded that earlier rumors that the Stamp Act had been repealed were unfounded. “Yet to me all of it is premature—believe an Expectancy of Repeal of Suspension, is reported for actual Repeal.”11

However, it was not long before Stiles could celebrate. On May 17 he wrote with
evident jubilation, “Glorious News of the Repeal arrived here Yesterday.”\(^\text{12}\) The rapid spread
of news indicated the strength of the connections among Americans. Stiles estimates that “in
Four Days time only ie. from 16th to 20th May the Joyful Tidings was communicated to all
the English Colonies except the Carolinas, & Georgia & Nova Scotia, & to more than Three
Quarters of all British America.”\(^\text{13}\)

Stamp Act opponents had developed a communications network that allowed them
to disseminate information throughout the colonies. Thereby, they were able to imagine
themselves participants in an inter-colonial community of virtuous citizens. But how did
communication work within each colony? In the “Stamp Act Notebook”, Stiles recorded the
ways in which the community affirmed itself in the wake of the repeal. Celebrations took
place across the colonies, and Stiles chronicled each one he heard about. The celebrations
were obviously attempts to bind people together—but Stiles also hinted at the ways in which
some people were to be excluded.

“Public Rejoycing at Newport.,” wrote Stiles in his entry for May 27. “Emblematical
Paintings at the Courthouse containg [sic] the Patriots &c Cannon discharged — at Night
General Illumination. Liberty Tree with Lanthorns. — Houses of two [added above:
“three”] Congregational Ministers illuminated each 108 the glorious Majority in House of
Commons. Every Thing Conducted with Decorum & beautiful Splendor — no Tumults nor
Accidents.”\(^\text{14}\) Stiles invariably recorded the stirring visual displays of the celebrations, such as
cannon firings, large paintings, hanging lights in the Liberty Tree. As with Stiles’s first image
in the “Stamp Act Notebook,” the memorial column, the visibility of these forms allowed
them to communicate their messages to a diverse public. One did not have to have read a

\(^{13}\) Stiles, “Stamp Act Notebook,” 38.
\(^{14}\) Stiles, “Stamp Act Notebook,” 32. There is actually one brief entry added for May 31, seemingly as an
afterthought.
pamphlet debate to be able to see the illuminated windows in each of Newport's houses—or even to light candles in one's own windows. Watching the celebration became a way to participate in the community of common feeling.

Stiles next devoted five pages of the "Notebook" to descriptions of "Rejoycings" held across the colonies as news spread that the Stamp Act had been repealed. The entries in this section are not in any particular order, chronological or otherwise; rather, they seem to have been recorded as Stiles received details of the festivities, probably from newspapers that carried authoritative accounts. But not surprisingly, it is the Newport "rejoycing" that he described in the greatest detail:

At Boston & Newport were exhibited Emblematical Paintings at their Rejoycings…. The Painting at Newport May 27, 1766 was eight feet wide & fourteen feet high: — In the lower Compartment was the Harbor of Newport with Fort George & the Ships Pitt Conway, Grafton &c Colors flying. — In the Second stood a LIBERTY surrounded by the Heads of the Rt. Hon. Mr Levy Conway, the Marq of Rockingham Ld Cornwallis, Ld Paulet, Ld Shelburn, Ld Torrington, General Howard, & Col Barrè: — In the Center of the third, his Majesty in his Royal Robes sat enthroned, & with a most gracious Aspect pointed to a scroll which fell from the Table on which his Right Arm rested on which scroll was inscribed in Capitals, "Stamp Act Repealed 1766 G.R." At his Majesty's Right Hand with on hand on his Breast & with the other holding forth Magna Charta stood the firm determined Friend of Constitutional LIBERTY the immortal PITT. At the left hand of his Majesty, holding in his right Hand the Bill of Rights stood the patriotic upright Camden. A Landscape charged with Vegetable productions & the Implements of Agriculture filled the upper triangular Compartment & finished the Piece. The whole was erected on the Courthouse Steps reaching up to the Balustrade projecting over the Door, & was illuminated at Night.
Over Mr Bowlers Door was also exhibited another piece of painting taken from a London Copper Plate, called the Repeal, but more properly called the Funeral of the Stamp Act. …This was also illuminated at night; but the Paintings did not appear so well at Night with Illumination, as in the day time without Candles.15

The painting illustrated the reconciliation of the Anglo-American community of virtue and thus served as a celebration of the reintegration of the empire upon its true principles. First, it named the ships in the depiction of Newport Harbor after members of Parliament who voted for repeal of the Stamp Act. Second, the painting associated the term “Liberty” with the portraits of British officers and legislators who had been on the side of the colonies during the Stamp Act crisis. Third, it pointed to the benevolent role of the king when assisted by the right advisers—in this case Pitt, that “firm determined Friend of Constitutional Liberty” and the “patriotic upright Camden.” These figures reaffirmed the story that Stiles had told in the earliest part of the “Notebook”: the battle between virtue and corruption among the high ministers of Britain. In this telling, Pitt’s victory over Bute has forever ended the crisis and allowed America to return to the empire. The final “compartment” of the large painting—“A Landscape charged with Vegetable productions & the Implements of Agriculture filled the upper triangular Compartment & finished the Piece”—therefore celebrated America’s role as breadbasket of the empire.

After describing the repeal celebrations, Stiles backtracked chronologically to record a chronicle of “Events in Succession 1765.” Now that the crisis had been averted Stiles wanted to objectively record the events during the chaotic summer and fall of the previous year. The chronicle was short—it covered the year in less than two pages—but contained short entries suggestive for what they do not say as much as for what they do. If the celebrations of the repeal period could create community by inclusion, then the crowd

actions of the crisis did the same and created community by exclusion as well. When bands of citizens—whether mobs or crowds—acted against those who were not behaving properly, they were both affirming their own membership in the virtuous community and also casting out those who were unworthy. The evidence suggests that Stiles was not as comfortable with this second form of creating a community. He referenced the riots, but without allowing any sense of the turmoil to enter the chronicle—almost as if he were trying to avoid thinking about the topic.

The events of August in Newport were again covered in the most detail (a relative term), sandwiched between brief entries recording the appointment of different colonies’ Stamp Masters and the ratification of various sets of Stamp Act Resolves:


28 Moffats and Howards Houses — fled to Man o’ War the Maidstone

29 A.J. resigned

Sept 1 Dr. M & M.H. saild for Bristol

But Stiles makes no mention of the events beyond this, despite the fact that according to several witnesses he had been involved in the whole affair, particularly in forcing Johnston’s resignation. In some sense, Stiles may have been shying away mentally from the gritty realities of the “virtuous community.” His chronicle had become a self-censored text, celebrating some activities and glossing over others.

It is likely that Stiles was personally uncomfortable with the riots. Howard and Moffatt were both acquaintances; though the two were Episcopalians, both were also part of the educated elite of Newport. Stiles later revealed his misgivings about a similar incident, the demolition of Massachusetts lieutenant governor Thomas Hutchinson’s house, because Hutchinson was “as firm a Friend to America as a Crown Officer can be.” Unlike most of

his fellows, Hutchinson “treated his Countrymen with Respect & Affection, as Brethren of Worth.”

Nevertheless, Stiles continued to celebrate the community-building activities that he was comfortable with. Along with the Boston celebration mentioned previously, on May 19, 1766, the town of Exeter in New Hampshire “erected a Cedar Monument on Liberty Square inscribed, ‘George III and Patriot Pitt forever’ on the other side ‘Liberty Restored March 18, 1766.’” And on Thursday, June 26, there was “a Public Thanksgiving in the Colonies of Connecticut and Rhode Island, on the same day. Proclamation issued by order of the respective Assemblies.” Some, however, were not particularly interested in giving thanks, for “Episcopalian kept the day with Grumbling & Reluctance.” At the Rhode Island celebration,

The Committee of the Sons &c at Newport procured a thick Copper Plate a foot wide & a foot & half long on the day of Rejoycing & affixed it to the Body of the Tree of Liberty at the Head of Thames Street, & Ten feet high, after first putting on this Inscription, designed to be Engraved but in this hurry only drawn in yellow Letters with a Pencil on a black Ground [in a box:]

THE TREE OF LIBERTY
M.DCC.LXV.

THE STAMP ACT REPEALED
MAR; xviii. M.DCC.LXVI.”


18. Stiles, “Stamp Act Notebook,” 42. The other towns that Stiles listed as holding celebrations included Sandwich, Salem, and Durham NH (42), as well as Portsmouth, Providence, Duxborough, Philadelphia, New York, New London, Hartford, Bristol RI, Saybrook, Medford, and Barnstable (39).
These celebrations in New Hampshire and Rhode Island both memorialized the virtuous community in the local landscape. Using far fewer words, they were intended to have the same effect on the viewer that Stiles envisioned when he imagined the columnar inscription that began the “Stamp Act Notebook.” Further, the Newport Liberty Tree was placed “at the Head of Thames Street,” already a potent symbolic site, as it also functioned as the entrance to the cemetery where the previous autumn’s funeral for “Liberty” had been held.

After describing the repeal of the Stamp Act and the way the community had celebrated, Stiles recorded for posterity the names of those who had made the repeal possible and who had worked against it. He did so by making lists of persons: Who were the Crown Officers—governors, customs officers, and stamp distributors—in each colony? Who were the persons in Parliament who had spoken for and against repeal? Who were the private citizens in each colony who led and resisted the efforts?

Stiles interspersed these lists through his writings of 1766, which suggests that he put them together at different times as new ideas came upon him. They are, not surprisingly, most detailed for Rhode Island and especially for Newport. In fact, he went so far as to devote an entire page to friends of the Stamp Act in Newport, marking the more egregious of the fifty-five offenders with an arrow containing one to four crosshatches as a means of denoting various “Degrees of Vigor and Activity.”

Stiles concluded his entries for 1766 with the second-longest section of the notebook, a narrative that began as a “List of the American Governors actually in the Colonies at the Time of the Stamp Act, especially during the grand Struggle for public Liberty all along the Continent from Aug to Dec 1765.” Though he discussed the generally bad behavior of the crown officers, the story quickly became one of seemingly universal popular resistance.

Stiles bestowed universal praise for the efforts of the people in resisting tyranny. Despite the fact that "the Crown Officers in every Province with their Connexions formed a powerful Anti-american Interest except Lieut Gov Horatio Sharpe of Maryland, & Gov Samuel Ward of Rhode Island," the people of the colonies were often "Spirited" in their efforts. Writing about New Jersey, Stiles exclaimed, "The Spirit was High in this Province... Above a Thousand Men were once assembled at a Meeting of the Sons of Liberty." And Virginians, despite their troubling Episcopalian faith, were still "noble Sons of Liberty." Even the provinces occupied by the British army were only forced into compliance by military power: the military presence in Nova Scotia "easily subdued the Spirit of Liberty," while in Quebec, there was no physical resistance, but "the Gazette was printed on Stamps, but universally refus’d & soon dropt."

Stiles included Quebec and Nova Scotia in his narrative of resistance to the Stamp Act. His America extended far beyond the borders of the "original thirteen" colonies; so too did his vision of the virtuous community. Though he concentrated his interests on the "traditionally" American mainland colonies, especially New England, the leader of the resistance due to its Congregational faith, there was space enough to recognize the efforts in all of Britain's Atlantic possessions. In addition to Nova Scotia and Quebec, Newfoundland and East and West Florida expanded Stiles's America across the entire north-south sweep of the seaboard, while the West Indies took the British colonies nearly from pole to equator.²⁰

Continuing a theme he began in the monument inscription that opened the "Notebook", Stiles again analyzed the demographics of the colonies. In doing so he confirmed his earlier realization that the American colonies had interests separate from those of Britain. More importantly, he concluded that the American colonies now had a population sufficiently large to govern themselves. Several times he repeated an enumeration of the provinces’ populations, always coming up with the same estimate of "One Million &

an Half Souls, Whites.” These people of European descent were accompanied by 200,000 blacks, “all of which except Twenty Thousand are South of Pennsylvania” and the 60,000 Indians that Stiles estimated still lived east of the Mississippi.21

Slaves and Indians entered no further into Stiles’s virtuous American community; they were removed from consideration on rigid racial lines. The question, instead, that consumed him was whether membership was predicated upon religious beliefs. Ezra Stiles consistently emphasized the division between Congregationalist and Episcopalian in the “Stamp Act Notebook.” The Episcopalians generally opposed the repeal of the Stamp Act. Reviewing Rhode Island’s participation in the resistance, Stiles wrote that “in Newport was the greatest Body of advocates for the Stamps of any one Town in America. The Customhouse Officers, Officers of three Men o’ War, & about one hundred Gentlemen Episcopalians openly called the Opposition Rebellion &c.”22 And the Episcopalians in Connecticut and Rhode Island had not been pleased about being forced to participate in the repeal celebrations (see p.98).

But Congregational ministers celebrated the repeal vigorously. At Newport, the Congregational ministers each illuminated their houses with 108 lights to represent “the glorious Majority in House of Commons.”23 In Plymouth, there was a celebration of the repeal, in which “the two Congregational Ministers Mr. Bacon & Mr. Robins” headed a procession “with their Bibles under their Arms.”24

The lines were not always so clear-cut, for Stiles could not deny that southern Anglicans were “genuine hearty Sons of Liberty.”25 To explain the discrepancy between the

actions of northern and southern Episcopalians, Stiles concluded that the Anglicans in the north derived their lack of community spirit more from their “European” connections than from their religion. They were directed by self-interest, while the Congregationalists and southern Episcopalians acted from a true love of liberty:

Stamp Act, Bishops, & Military Govt were all Part of the Grenvillian System of Plantation Government. — all agreeable to the northern Episcopalians as means to introduce & fix them in Supremacy over Dissenters, & in Monopoly of Revenues & other public Offices. These Motives never touched the Southern Episcopalians. In these therefore & in the northern Presbyterians the Spirit of Liberty blazed with Impetuosity, They felt the Oppression & without Consent broke out into Opposition. They were joyned by the Baptists & Lutherans, but opposed by the Quakers & Northern Episcopalians.26

Fortunately for Stiles, his estimates of the population of the mainland colonies suggested that the friends of liberty, divided into their ecclesiastical groupings, outnumbered the supporters of the Stamp Act by a ratio of 14 to 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians &amp; Baptists</td>
<td>1,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So Episcopalians</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Episcopalians</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quakers &amp; Crown Officers</td>
<td>70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 ½ Mil.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A hint of what this breakdown implied comes at the end of the section written in 1766, when Stiles adds in the West Indies and estimates that the “Whites in all British America don’t exceed 1¼ Million Souls — able to raise Four hundred Thousand sensible

Men." In other words, Stiles realized that the colonies could by themselves raise a significant fighting force—a necessary instrument for defense against British tyranny but also against the insurgent Indian threat in the Ohio Valley and the old French territories.

That Stiles was quite aware of the military force that a unified American society could wield does not imply he was considering a rebellion. But it does reflect the power that he felt by the summer of 1766 as a patriot and a “friend of Liberty.” The Stamp Act had been repealed, and Stiles saw himself as part of the virtuous community that had helped instigate that repeal. The colonists had protested in many ways, violent and nonviolent. If Stiles was not comfortable with the riots and the house attacks perpetrated by certain members of the community, he could point to the efforts of men like Daniel Dulany of Maryland, “our greatest, ablest Advocate in America...[who] published a Pamphlet August 1765 which formed Mr Pitts Judgment — & for which he merits the Gratitude of Americans thro’ all ages.” And he felt himself part of that community which had, in defiance of royal governors, rallied to form the Stamp Act Congress. The colonies had acted together in passing resolves against tyranny and had organized into small bands that shared information with great efficiency. Stiles was a part of that network. In short, he was no longer a member of the hopeless and passive resistance he had described in 1765 but instead part of a strong alliance that protected American liberties against Crown officers, corrupt ministers, and the specter of the self-interested northern Episcopalians.

* * *

Much of the third section of the “Stamp Act Notebook” is radically different from the parts written in 1765 and 1766. While the second half of the section is simply a rehash of repeal anniversary celebrations in 1767 that mirror the descriptions of repeal celebrations of

the previous year, the first part of the 1767 writing paints a very different picture of Newport’s “virtuous community.” The Stamp Act itself no longer occupied the center of attention. Gone was the heavy emphasis on the creation of an American identity; gone was the need to record that community’s efforts against corruption for posterity. Instead, Stiles wrote, perhaps unwittingly, a story of petty infighting among the Newport Sons of Liberty as they prepared to celebrate the first anniversary of the repeal. He exposed the divisions among the supposed leaders of the virtuous community: they were divided by religion (some were even Episcopalians), by class differences, and by Rhode Island’s party politics. The local opposition to the Stamp Act, it was clear, had been only a brief coalition between competing factions. Interest, not ideology, ruled the celebration on March 18, 1767.

Stakes in Rhode Island politics were high, since the Governor was not chosen by the Crown as was the case in most colonies; instead, he and the other officers were elected in yearly balloting among propertied white men in the colony. Two factions had sprung up by 1757—that of Stephen Hopkins, based in Newport, and Samuel Ward’s Newport group—and each printed ballots listing the candidates they supported for each office. For the past decade the governorship had shuttled back and forth between Hopkins and Ward, each as governor doing not much more than placating and rewarding his own supporters. For the two years before the election of May, 1767, the colony’s focus had been on imperial issues as much as local; this year, then, Rhode Islanders anticipated the balloting even more than usual.30

Newport’s Sons of Liberty were divided between the Hopkins and Ward factions. Each group sponsored a celebration of the repeal. Ward’s faction, containing the great majority of Newport’s Sons of Liberty, held theirs at the Liberty Tree; Hopkins’ supporters gathered at Easton’s Point. Stiles described each in his “Notebook”:

[Ward faction celebration:]

At Newport on this Day the Committee of the Sons of Liberty, assisted by a number of the Sons of Liberty, pruned the Tree of Liberty, which is now above forty years old. In its top aloft they had early in the morning erected the Flag of Liberty, which they took down at sunset. Two days before the anniversary they had taken down the Plate, the Letters being only painted last year, & had the Letters upon a black Ground deeply Engraved, repainted & Gilt; and this morning affixed it with large Copper Nails to the Tree of Liberty. The Copper Plate is 18 Inc. long & 12 Inc. wide.

[in a box:] “THE TREE OF LIBERTY / M.DCC.LXV. / THE STAMP ACT REPEALED / MAR; xviii. M.DCC.LVXI.”

[Hopkins faction celebration:]

On the Mast at the Point [Easton Point, perhaps half a mile to the north and west of the Parade] was a Flag, & an Inscription on a Board painted in red Letter on a White Ground, & affixed atop the mast:

“THE DEFENDERS of LIBERTY”31

Both the Hopkins and Ward factions’ celebrations included elements that emphasized the unity of the British empire. The Ward celebration’s inscription focused on the action of Parliament in repealing the Stamp Act, not the actions of the colonists that provoked the repeal. The Hopkins display is more difficult to interpret—but if it was the British flag that flew on the mast, it was the people of the empire, British again, being represented as “the defenders of liberty.”

Stiles had attended a meeting of the Sons of Liberty as they prepared for the anniversary of the repeal; observing the group’s inner workings, he was able to record the

rifts among the members.

He was only able to attend the meeting of March 18 (the day before the celebration) because the Sons had decided to invite him to speak at the celebration in his capacity as a Congregational minister. Writing quickly, he began with a list of members of the presiding committee, marked by religion; he followed with a set of brief descriptions of these men. Of the fourteen, five were Episcopalian and another was a Quaker, balanced by three Baptists and five Congregationalists—an unexpected mix given Stiles’s previous airing of grievances against Episcopalians as “no Friends to Liberty.” But Stiles praised all but two of the Episcopalians, who were not “genuine Sons of Liberty” but “were added after the News [of the repeal celebration?] to assist in making Rockets & other powder Works.” But otherwise, “The Committee contained some Gentlemen of the first Figure in Town for opulence, Sense, & Politeness: and without Question was as respectable as could have been chosen in Newport, & the most respectable Committee of the Sons of Liberty on this Continent.”

One of the particularly interesting figures was the exception to the last: Major Spooner, who “was from among middling & lower Life & united in himself the whole Confidence of the plebeians — he was cautious & on his Guard, but his whole Soul was in Liberty — he was vigorous & circumspect, safe but enterprizing. A Man perhaps of [abt.?] 30. He was very necessary, & perhaps as important as any Man of the Committee, as they without him would not have had so entirely the Confidence of the Populace.” Spooner acted more like a Samuel Crandall than a John Webber: he had the trust of Newport’s lower classes, but steered them towards the elite merchants’ goals rather than settling their own economic grievances. Here, inadvertently, Stiles revealed the primary division that had existed in the local community of Stamp Act protestors since the riot of August, 1765. The town’s elite did not have the trust of the people but had to rely on a go-between. The

vertical bonds of Newport society were thinner and stretched further than Stiles liked to imagine. 33

Spooner was himself absent from the meeting. He was engaged on a mission for Colonel Joseph Wanton and was setting up the Hopkins faction's display at the Point. Wanton was also absent—he was Hopkins's candidate for deputy governor and was taking part in campaign preparations. Like Wanton, Spooner was a Hopkins supporter, not unusual for non-elites in Newport. But Wanton's position was far more awkward, for at least Spooner was a respected member of the opposing party. Wanton, instead, was considered a Tory by the other Sons of Liberty. Everyone knew that “Wanton was in heart no Son of Liberty for they had once found him making Merit with Gusty Johnston the Stamp Officer.” His alliance with Hopkins against Newport's Samuel Ward was a political marriage of convenience, meant to damage Ward's strong home base. 34

In this context, the two celebrations thus were the products of opposing political factions, each trying to claim for itself the banner of patriotism and virtue. And each faction was trying to score still subtler points against the other. The very format of the celebration at the Liberty Tree, the one under discussion at the meeting, had to be determined by delicate political compromise. First, one of the Episcopalians questioned the notion of having Ezra Stiles speak: was the celebration a religious or a secular one? Second, they asked if it would offend the crown officers and Tories—and thus invite repercussions from Britain—if the celebration involved cannon fire?

The celebrants chose to err on the side of conservatism. A committee of a Baptist, a Quaker, and an Episcopalian, acting for the body of the Sons of Liberty, formally invited Stiles to speak. This disparate group, theoretically, would help to negate the other Episcopalian's protest “that religion had nothing to do with” the celebration. Stiles accepted

the invitation, but later that evening began to worry. He tried to justify speaking by arguing to himself that “the Crisis of Liberty in America & its Deliverance 1766, is a public Precedent to the World.” Then, however, Stiles decided not to speak, “being informed that some of my Congregation were in pain for me, & fearing I should excite another Tempest of [Episcopal] Abuse, & indeed that on the whole they should be glad I would not preach on this first critical Anniversary.” So the celebration was shorn of both religious overtones and its keynote speaker.35

Similarly, the Sons worried that firing cannon as part of the celebration might seem threatening. Some feared that “the King and Ministry will be displeased & account it an Insult & Triumph if America should fire Canon &c on the return of this day.” In this case, Stiles felt, the Sons won with a moral victory when they desisted but Wanton fired cannon during his celebration at the Point. “Had Cannon been discharged by order of the Committee, the AntiAmericans would have represented it an insult on the Parliament—but as a Brother has done it to serve political Ends, I expect they will be silent.” Stiles believed that the Sons of Liberty now had the option to fire the cannon another year since a precedent had been set.36

How, then, did Newport’s Sons of Liberty celebrate the anniversary? They managed to skirt the issue of local politics simply by visiting both sites of celebration. Afterwards, “the Committee of the Sons of Liberty were invited by Mr Bowler to an Evening Entertainment at his House, which was Splendid & generous,” and where they discharged rockets upon toasting Pitt and Chatham. “There were also other Collections of the Sons; among all whom this Commemoration awakened Principles of great Efficacy & Importance in human Nature.”37 The Sons did not tend to the Liberty Tree themselves, but instead “gave Joseph

the English Gardner three Dollars for Pruning the Tree of Liberty: a noble Tree!” Imperial conflict had abated, but local factions remained.38

The text of the “Stamp Act Notebook” charts an astounding transformation in the attitudes of the men who had led the resistance to imperial policy, including Stiles himself. In the summer of 1765, the situation had seemed dire. Ezra Stiles was in despair as he wrote his fiery history of the colonies: the battle against corruption was lost and all that remained was the monument to the colonists’ virtuous struggle. But less than a year later, liberty had risen from its grave as surely as had its avatar in Newport’s mock funeral. The colonists found themselves saved by forces beyond their control. The protests, the resolves, the pamphlet by Dulany that set Pitt’s mind were, for Stiles, prayers answered by a suddenly merciful God. In response, the American people celebrated as one—the northern Episcopalians excepted. The local communities that had each struggled valiantly, drawing strength from the knowledge that they were not alone, now reinforced their unity by telling each other about their festivities. The whole—the virtuous community—was something greater than the sum of its parts.

But by 1767, Newport’s virtuous men, now calling themselves Sons of Liberty, had allowed themselves to devolve into the interest groups that had existed before the Stamp Act crisis. The struggles of the colonists against corruption were less important than local factional politics. Even the simplest elements of the repeal anniversary celebration had become fodder for argument and oneupmanship. The idea of liberty had been overshadowed by submission to vague threats of Crown revenge. The attitudes Stiles exhibited—those he recorded of even the most fervent Sons of Liberty—were a far cry from the bravado he displayed in his 1765 inscription.

CONCLUSION

As Ezra Stiles composed the “Stamp Act Notebook,” as he waited anxiously for news of repeal in April of 1766, he must have occasionally arisen from his desk to gaze out the windows of his home. From the upper story of his well-fashioned house on Clarke Street, Stiles could look northward, where he could see the Colony House standing less than a block away. Below the Colony House, Stiles had a clear vista to the Parade, where the summer before Martin Howard Jr, Thomas Moffatt, and Augustus Johnston had been hung in effigy and where Stiles himself had spoken out against Johnston’s supposed resignation. Even if hidden by other houses and by the plethora of fresh leaves and fragrant blossoms that marked the coming of a new spring, the observer knew that close by were Samuel Hall’s printing office, the cemetery, and the Liberty Tree, itself now bearing verdant promise to Stiles’ hopes. These sites in the landscape, for Stiles, were each pregnant with meaning. Each was a visible reminder of Newporters’ virtuous resistance to the Stamp Act and to imperial corruption.

Stiles, then, might have turned to the west, where he could see out over Newport harbor. Merchantmen bobbed gently up and down with the waves as they lay at rest by the many wharves. Those merchantmen, in carrying the trade of Newport, had for months been bringing Stiles news of the resistance across the colonies. As he restively tapped his foot, waiting for a packet from Britain that might carry an authentic report on Parliament’s decision, he thought about that greater community he envisioned, Americans working together (but led by New England, of course) to transform the vast, unknown expanse of
the continent into God’s country. The Stamp Act crisis had unified the colonists as nothing else could have; Stiles believed that their actions had delivered them from the forces working to enslave them. Local struggles by faithful men, though essential to the cause, might each have produced little. But the virtuous community Stiles saw was the summation of those local struggles, and something more besides—the knowledge that the other virtuous men were out there, in America and in Britain, and dependent on one’s own actions. Newport’s battles were no longer as small when not just a city, not just a continent, but the British constitution depended on them.

The colonists, including Newport’s, had done their part. Now Stiles could only wait, and hope.
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VITA

Joshua Fogarty Beatty

Born in Warwick, Rhode Island, October 18, 1972. The author graduated from Bishop Hendricken High School in that city, June 1990, and received a B.A. in anthropology from the University of Rhode Island in 1995. After working for several years as an archaeologist and an architectural conservator for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the author entered the Department of History as a graduate assistant in August 2000 and was accepted into the PhD program in that department in February 2001.