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From the Lower Sort to the Lower Orders: Labor and Self-Identity in Boston, 1737-1837

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B.A., Boston College, 2008
M.A., Emory University, 2012

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Abstract

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By Christopher Sawula

This dissertation examines the emergence of a distinct white male working identity in Boston between the market riot of 1737 and the Broad Street Riot of 1837. In the early colonial era, Boston's laboring population, consisting of white skilled and unskilled laborers, free blacks and slaves, Native Americans, women, and European-born seamen grew together as a loosely cohesive community through shared social, economic, and cultural experiences. After the American Revolution, however, this laboring community fractured as a result of two interrelated processes. The first saw the emergence of class divisions between Boston's laboring population and the city's middle and upper class inhabitants. In the second, the laboring population transformed from a community in which white male Protestants could express feelings of solidarity and cooperation across gender, ethnic, and racial lines to one in which white male workers consciously separated themselves from other laboring groups. This dissertation traces two aspects of this specific fault line: the deepening racial division between white males and African Americans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the ethnic and religious divisions that emerged in the early 1800s between Protestant male workers and Irish Catholic immigrants.

This dissertation seeks to move beyond the tendency of historians to examine laboring communities in isolation rather than as interrelated constituents of larger working populations. Through an examination of Boston's white male workers and their changing relationship with the city's larger laboring population, this project demonstrates how urban laborers emphasized social divisions over economic solidarity and split workers into distinct groups. The emergence of discrete working class communities from a diverse but still cohesive early colonial laboring population suggests a complex process in which the ideologies of race, religion, gender, nativism, and class were deeply intertwined. Boston's white male workers inhabited multiple subject positions that when taken together, informed how they situated themselves within a rapidly changing urban society. While this body of laborers continued to change after the Civil War, the emergence of a distinct group of white male laborers between 1737 and 1837 marks a crucial phase in the ongoing history of working class identity.

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Introduction

In June 1837, one of the chief engineers of Boston's fire companies received a vitriolic letter from an Irish inhabitant of the city. Sent shortly after over fifteen thousand Bostonians had rioted in a clash that brought volunteer fire companies and other Protestant laborers in conflict with Irish Catholic immigrants, the letter accused the engineer of protecting the identities of fire volunteers who had spent hours demolishing Irish homes and destroying property. The author believed that the firemen had acted as a vanguard, driving the Irish back into their neighborhood on Broad Street so that white, male, "Yankee" rioters could advance. After the assault and demolition of Irish Catholic homes, the author believed that Protestant laborers were "treating the Irish here worse than the Mexicans do the Yankees at Tampico."¹ Comparing the Broad Street Riot to Jose Mexia's failed 1835 expedition to Tampico, Mexico and the subsequent execution of twenty-eight American volunteers, the anonymous author felt that the Irish community was being punished simply for being immigrants in an otherwise "Yankee" city.²

This feeling of ethnic and religious isolation, exemplified in the Broad Street Riot and smaller acts of violence against Catholics throughout the 1820s and 1830s, was the culmination of a decades-long process within Boston's laboring population. In my dissertation, I explore how a distinct white male working identity emerged in Boston between the market riots of 1737 and the Broad Street Riot of 1837. This evolution involved two overlapping and interrelated processes. The first saw the emergence of class divisions between Boston's laboring population and the city's middle and upper class

¹ Anonymous letter, June 1837, City Council Committee on the Fire Department Records, City of Boston Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

² Eugene C. Barker, "The Tampico Expedition," *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association* 6, no. 3 (Jan., 1903): 177; C. Alan Hutchinson, "General Jose Antonio Mexia and His Texas Interests," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (Oct., 1978): 140.

inhabitants over the course of a century. In the second, the laboring population transformed from a community in which white male Protestants could express feelings of solidarity and cooperation with other workers across gender, ethnic, and racial lines to one in which white male workers distanced themselves from these laboring groups. In focusing on how the laboring population fractured into discrete working communities, this dissertation will trace two aspects of this specific fault line: the deepening racial division between white males and African Americans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the ethnic and religious divisions that emerged in the early 1800s between Protestant male workers and Irish Catholic immigrants.

While the exact contours of these relations would continue to evolve as the nineteenth century progressed, these transformations marked a crucial phase in Boston's development and ultimately established the basic distinctions that governed the city's social relations in the subsequent decades. In highlighting this process, I examine why class identity began to emerge among early colonial American workers and how race, gender, religion, and nativism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries influenced this development.

I contend that understanding how Boston's white, male, Protestant workers came to isolate themselves from other laboring groups as well as from middle and upper class Bostonians is crucial to understanding the experience of antebellum class. The emergence of a specific and discrete working class identity from a diverse but still cohesive early colonial laboring population suggests a complex process in which the ideologies of race, religion, gender, nativism, and class were deeply intertwined. Boston's white male workers inhabited multiple subject positions that when taken together, informed how they

situated themselves within a rapidly changing urban society. While this body of laborers continued to change after the Civil War and even came to include Irish immigrants, the emergence of a distinct group of laborers between 1737 and 1837 marks a crucial phase in the ongoing history of working class identity.

By examining the origins of class and laboring identity, this dissertation builds upon and challenges many of the existing histories of early American laborers. Beginning in the 1960s, historians like Gary Nash, Jesse Lemisch, and Alfred F. Young began to examine early colonial urban workers as a separate category within Anglo-American society.³ As Gary Nash argues in *The Urban Crucible*, histories of early colonial America had perpetuated the myth that economic stratification did not exist in the settlements along the North American coastline. Many historians have argued that the abundant land taken from Native Americans, combined with the perpetual need for additional labor, guaranteed upward social mobility for laborers and artisans and prevented class hierarchies from forming in early colonial towns and cities. More recent scholarship, including works by Seth Rockman, Marcus Rediker, and Clare Lyons, have continued to expand our knowledge of early American workers and demonstrate the development of their unique social, cultural, and economic outlook.⁴ This project continues these efforts

³ Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (July 1, 1968): 371–407; Alfred Fabian Young. *Liberty Tree : Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Alfred Fabian Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael, eds., *Revolutionary Founders : Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2011).

⁴ Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Clare A. Lyons. *Sex among the Rabble : An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006);

and examines how Boston's heterogeneous colonial laboring population coalesced into a cohesive social and cultural community in the eighteenth century only to fracture in the early republic.

Despite these efforts, the myth of a classless society often persists within studies of early colonial society. Historians like Gordon Wood, for example, have continued to downplay the presence of social divisions and economic stratification in this period or ignored them entirely.⁵ These historians contend that corporate communalism, republican ideology, and the egalitarian belief that no American was above working for a living encouraged social cohesion and minimized any potential friction caused by economic stratification. By contrast, I argue that corporate communalism broke down in the first half of the eighteenth century as laborers challenged upper class leaders and sought remedies for economic inequality. While Wood is correct in highlighting the importance of egalitarian ideology to white colonists engaged in the American Revolution, I demonstrate that this drove, rather than blunted, feelings of class stratification and social conflict.

This dissertation also seeks to complicate the traditional portrayal of nineteenth century journeymen and masters. In addition to primarily focusing on the antebellum rather than the early republic era, historians have emphasized economic determinism in explaining the emergence of working class consciousness. In doing so, historians have focused their efforts on disaffected artisans and constructed an artificial distinction between skilled and unskilled workers. As Seth Rockman argues, “despite the centrality

Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1991); G.B. Warden, “Inequality and Instability in Eighteenth-Century Boston: A Reappraisal,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6, no. 4 (April 1, 1976): 585–620.

of casual and low-end laborers to the seaport economies of the new nation, labor historians have privileged the experiences of that minority of workers associated with the craft workshop.”⁶ As a result, existing works concerning nineteenth century workers have often constructed a narrative that privileges skilled artisans at the expense of the unskilled workers that constituted the bulk of urban laboring populations.

In addition, antebellum labor histories have often focused on the transition towards industrialization and the subsequent hardship felt by journeymen artisans. Although Boston experienced this transition towards the bastard manufacturing system, as explored in Sean Wilentz’s history of New York City, the change was not driven by factory production.⁷ Boston’s tradesmen underwent a slow decrease in their standard of living, but the city remained a predominantly maritime and commercial economy throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. In contrast with New York City, Boston’s laboring population began to attack economic inequality and the wealth of the city’s upper classes prior to industrialization. Given this context, this dissertation argues that while economic upheaval helped trigger the development of a laboring identity among Boston’s white male workers, it would not have occurred without accompanying ideological transformations occurring within American society.⁸ For Boston’s workers, class ideology required concurrent developments involving race, nativism, gender, and religion in order to emerge in the 1830s.

Colonial and early antebellum Boston provides an ideal setting in which to explore these issues. While many historians have explored New York City to reveal

⁶ Rockman, 9.

⁷ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁸ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1964), 9.

critically important trends within urban laboring populations, I argue that New York's status as the preeminent metropolitan center sets it apart from other early American cities. As Kenneth Jackson and David Dunbar explain in *Empire City*, the very qualities that render New York City a compelling topic of study—its diversity, density, and commercial and industrial facilities, among others—also establish it as a singularly unique city.⁹ In contrast to New York City's meteoric rise in size and power after the American Revolution, Boston grew into a powerful regional economy but could no longer meaningfully rival New York City or even Philadelphia in the nineteenth century. Remaining primarily a maritime and commercial center, Boston did not provide the same sense of opportunity as New York City and subsequently attracted less immigration and created less diversity among its populace. As a result, Boston remained more akin to the smaller, regional cities and towns that developed in the antebellum era. While the city has its own distinct history, Boston's growth and development provides an example for how class and culture intersected in more typical northern antebellum cities.

By focusing on Boston, this project also seeks to broaden the current conception of New England labor. Although Boston's laboring population has been discussed within studies of the colonial era, historians of New England have typically overlooked the city's nineteenth century laborers in favor of those operating and organizing in the mill towns throughout the region. Due to their singular economies and vital importance to the development of American industrialization, towns like Lowell, Fall River, Webster, Dover, and Pawtucket have attracted labor historians and overshadowed New England's

⁹ Kenneth Jackson and David S. Dunbar, *Empire City: New York Through the Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1-6.

preexisting urban centers.¹⁰ Subsequently, those studies that have examined Boston's antebellum working populations have predominantly begun with the 1840s in order to capture the impact of middle class moral reformers, Irish famine immigration, and partnerships with mill workers during the Ten-Hour Movement. Without large-scale factories and clear divisions between employees and mill owners to act as a focal point, little has been done to understand how Boston's white male workers pulled away from the early colonial laboring community and formed a discrete, cohesive unit. This dissertation explores the continuities between Boston's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century laboring population and demonstrates how urban centers established in the early colonial era evolved and changed in the antebellum period.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to ongoing discussion concerning the development of race, gender, and religion in the antebellum era. Historians like Joanne Pope Melish, Leslie Harris, David Roediger, and Teresa Murphy have explored how race and gender influenced the contours of laboring identity and communities.¹¹ These studies have revealed how lived experiences and personal kinship networks, in addition to economic pressures, influenced how workers positioned themselves in relationship to one another, their employers, social reformers, and political officials. This dissertation builds

¹⁰ Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Teresa Anne Murphy, *Ten Hours' Labor: Religion, Reform, and Gender in Early New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of the Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

¹¹ Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. (London: Verso, 2007); Teresa Anne Murphy, *Ten Hours' Labor: Religion, Reform, and Gender in Early New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); Jane and William Pease, *Ladies, Women & Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

upon these efforts to explain how Boston's early colonial laboring community fractured under the influence of race, religion, and gender.

While this dissertation touches upon gender, it primarily focuses on how white male Protestant workers self-consciously separated themselves from African Americans and Irish Catholics immigrants. In examining gender within Boston's laboring community, I seek to build upon the work of historians like Clare Lyons, Christine Stansell, Jane and William Pease, and Al Young to reveal the lives of working women in early American cities.¹² These historians have demonstrated that throughout the colonial and antebellum eras, women played an intrinsic role in the development of formal and informal urban economies and laboring social and cultural practices. This dissertation recognizes the role that working women played in the collapse of corporate communalism, their role in resisting British authority in the imperial crisis, and their shifting economic status both before and after the American Revolution. I argue that instead of being acknowledged as productive members of the laboring community, women became increasingly marginalized as men began to accept and adapt the ideology of Republican Motherhood as described by historians like Linda Kerber, Nancy Cott, and Rosemarie Zagari.¹³ Boston's women continued to participate in the urban economy as

¹² Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Jane and William Pease, *Ladies, Women & Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Alfred Fabian Young, "The Women of Boston: 'Persons of Consequence' in the Making of the American Revolution, 1765-76," in *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, ed. Harriet Applewhite and Darline Levy (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 181-226.

¹³ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1986); Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

workers, but new concepts of masculinity led to an antebellum laboring identity that excluded female laborers.

This study also examines the end of slavery in Massachusetts to illuminate how Boston's free black population separated from the city's larger laboring population. While historians like James and Lois Horton, Leonard Curry, and Adelaide Cromwell have revealed the daily lives of black Bostonians, these works often focus on the development of the African American community that emerged in the early 1830s.¹⁴ More specifically, these histories emphasize how African Americans formed a vibrant community through the establishment of specific institutions that drew black Bostonians together. As a result, the existing literature reflects a time period when the community was already largely independent from the white laboring population. As these projects have been instrumental in depicting the pull factors that encouraged African Americans to form a supportive community, this project emphasizes the push factors, specifically new concepts of race espoused by white male workers, that led to friction within Boston's colonial laboring community and the subsequent divide between black and white laborers.

In addition, the fracturing of Boston's laboring community complicates the connections often drawn between whiteness, labor, and Irish immigration by historians like David Roediger. In *Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger argues that as Irish immigrants became an increasingly visible presence within northern cities, nativist workers and

¹⁴ James Horton and Lois Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979); Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Adelaide M. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins: Boston's Black Upper Class, 1750-1950* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994); Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

writers suggested that the “Irish were part of a separate caste or a ‘dark’ race, possibly originally African.”¹⁵ While Roediger finds rich evidence in Philadelphia and New York to support this contention, Bostonians prior to the Irish Famine did not view Irish immigrants in the same way. In Boston, religion rather than race was the crucial element in fostering hostility towards Irish immigrants. Only as Boston entered into the 1840s and 1850s would these two arguments merge and create a cultural environment in which “anti-immigrant politicians concentrated on Irish subservience to religious authority and Irish degradation, loosely arguing at times that the famine itself had helped produce an Irish ‘race’ incapable of freedom.”¹⁶

Unlike their portrayal of African Americans, Boston’s white Protestant laborers focused on religious attributes rather than racial characteristics when attacking Irish immigrants. Throughout the antebellum era, Boston’s labor newspapers were quick to blame violence perpetrated by Irish immigrants not on supposed innate racial qualities but on the influence “of the Bishop and Superior.”¹⁷ As Ray Allen Billington explains in *The Protestant Crusade*, this mentality was the byproduct of the Second Great Awakening, where evangelical fervor produced a national environment in which “Protestantism suddenly became a thing to be venerated and protected, while Catholicism, as an antagonistic system, was proportionately resented.”¹⁸ Although Boston’s white workers attacked and discriminated against the Irish like their counterparts in New York and Philadelphia, they did so out of religious rather than racial

¹⁵ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 133.

¹⁶ Roediger, 144.

¹⁷ *Boston Weekly Reformer*, July 4, 1835.

¹⁸ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), 42.

prejudice. These contrasting motivations demonstrate that while antebellum urban laborers shared a significant number of cultural and economic experiences, their trajectory towards forming laboring identities and class consciousness cannot be considered universal. While workers were influenced by many of the same national transformations, local context decided how these transformations would be interpreted.

These unique perceptions among Boston's white workers demonstrate the importance of studying this city's laboring population. In order to understand why white male Protestant laborers distinguished themselves from African Americans, Irish immigrants, female workers, and middle and upper class Bostonians, I have focused on the period between the market riot of 1737 and the Broad Street Riot of 1837. Over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Boston's workers underwent a fundamental shift in composition. In the market riot, Boston's laboring community, consisting of white skilled and unskilled laborers, free blacks and slaves, women, and European-born seamen rallied together as a cohesive group in order to challenge economic inequality and assert their view of how Boston's society should function. Triggered by high food prices and collusion between merchants, the riot was the first of many colonial instances in which Boston's laborers demonstrated a more or less cohesive set of communal values across racial and ethnic lines.

* * *

In the early nineteenth century, cooperation among laborers fractured as ideology and self-identity sharpened the differences among these working groups. By the 1830s, Boston's workers had divided themselves into distinct communities along the lines of race, religion, gender, and class. These boundaries were starkly exposed in the Broad

Street Riot of 1837. Sparked by a clash between a fire company staffed by white, native born, and Protestant laborers, and an Irish Catholic funeral procession, the Broad Street Riot grew to encompass over fifteen thousand people. Whereas the market riot and other colonial crowd actions found Boston's laborers acting in concert, the Broad Street Riot situated members of the city's working population in open combat among themselves.

Not only does 1837 mark the high point of laboring identity and community in Boston, it also signifies the sudden end of this one hundred year process. The Panic of 1837, a banking and currency crisis that plunged the country into severe depression, abruptly terminated the class ideology that had been developing among Boston's white male Protestant workers. As the economy began to recover in the early 1840s, it became clear that the economic calamity had fundamentally altered the city's workers. Boston's white male Protestant workers grew increasingly willing to form alliances with female mill workers, middle class reformers, and, as the decades progressed, even Irish immigrants.¹⁹ White workers continued, however, to ostracize African American workers and the cross-class organizations that developed in the 1840s and after the Civil War did not attempt partnerships with black Bostonians.²⁰ Despite Boston's reputation as a hotbed of abolitionism, anti-slavery advocates did little to bridge the racial gap between black and white laborers and some even employed African Americans for only the most menial of tasks.²¹ Boston's African American community would foster alliances among the

¹⁹ Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 113; David Zonderman, *Uneasy Allies: Working for Labor Reform in Nineteenth-Century Boston* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 41.

²⁰ Zonderman, 16.

²¹ Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 102.

city's abolitionist activists, but laborers would continue to enforce their imposed racial boundaries.

By creating even more economic competition and financial hardship among Boston's workers, the Panic of 1837 forced white male Protestant laborers to accept the primacy of their employers and advocate through moderate, moral reform. Boston's white Yankee workers continued to view themselves as a discrete unit, but the Panic of 1837 marked a fundamental shift in how they approached other workers, employers, and middle class reformers.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. In chapter one, I begin with the formation of the laboring community in the early eighteenth century. In the early colonial era, Boston's laboring population coalesced into a loosely bound but cohesive community through the recognition of their shared cultural, social, and economic experiences. Challenging the town's leadership and growing economic inequality, the laboring community used crowd actions and public celebrations to challenge the authority of upper class Bostonians and assert their own views concerning social order.

In chapter two, I examine how this laboring community sharpened these attacks against upper class authority and economic inequality during the imperial crisis. Through the Stamp Act crisis, the nonimportation boycotts, and the King Street Riot, the diverse laboring community asserted their position within the town and pushed for a more egalitarian social and economic environment. I show in chapter three how Boston's workers continued this process in the American Revolution and forged alliances with the middling Patriots to oust British leaders and seize control of the town. United against common enemies, Boston's early colonial laborers emphasized their common social and

cultural values and used them to create what they hoped would be a more democratic and egalitarian future.

In chapter four, I discuss how Boston's early republican workers found themselves struggling amidst rapid population growth and an increasingly competitive maritime economy. Faced with the imposition of the bastard artisan system and the degradation of labor, Boston's white male Protestant workers lashed out against the city's upper class inhabitants and blamed them for the unfair economic system. Through public demonstrations, formal associations, and labor meetings, Boston's white male workers politicized economic inequality and challenged the unbalanced labor market. Using their status as enfranchised citizens, these workers emphasized their status as men in order to stake a claim in Boston's public life. In doing so, white male workers ignored the status of working women and eliminated them from their masculine conception of the laboring community. By expanding their laboring tactics to include the public sphere, Boston's white male workers accepted the ideology of Republican Motherhood and denied women equal status in their laboring coalitions. Despite several strikes and labor organizations, Boston's male laborers would have nothing to show for their efforts by 1837. In the aftermath, some laborers believed that they had gone too far in restricting the laboring community by emphasizing distinctions in race, religion, ethnicity, and gender.

Chapter five discusses how these divisions emerged in the laboring community over the same time period. Heightened racial and religious tensions, unreliable economic opportunities, and new demographics caused Boston's laboring population to fracture. Embracing and espousing new racial ideologies, Boston's white laborers first separated from the city's African American population. As the city moved into the antebellum era,

Irish immigration revived long-standing anti-Catholic prejudices, and workers responded by preventing Irish Catholics from integrating into their community. Incorporating violence into these racist and anti-Catholic ideologies, Boston's white Protestant workers sought to control access to laboring jobs and establish the boundaries that defined their specific neighborhoods. Through riots and everyday abuse, Boston's white Protestant laborers separated themselves from African Americans and Irish immigrants and split the laboring population into three constituent groups.

Chapter 1: “Lewd, Loose, and Disorderly People”: The Laboring Community of Colonial Boston

On March 24, 1737, a large group of tradesmen assembled near Dock Square in the center of Boston and vented their frustrations against unscrupulous merchants and unreasonably high food prices. Disguising themselves with painted faces or by dressing as clergy members, the mob methodically demolished the town’s Middle Market House and a cluster of nearby butcher stalls.¹ After completing this task, the crowd traveled into the North End neighborhood, cut through several posts holding up the North Market House, and rendered it structurally unstable for use. Content that these actions demonstrated the seriousness of their social and economic concerns to the greater Boston community, the crowd dispersed and returned to their homes.²

Throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Boston’s laboring population took to the town’s streets to destroy homes, businesses, personal property, and even attack individuals. Workers engaged in riots to protest what they perceived to be unfair or deviant behavior. Although Bostonians often feared crowd actions, the town’s middling and upper class inhabitants tolerated them under the auspices of corporate communalism. As long as mobs acted in accordance with this social system, riots could be understood as signs of a functioning community.³

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, however, corporate communalism began to fracture as common financial hardship, living conditions, and moral standards drew workers into a loosely cohesive community separate from middling and upper class Bostonians. As laborers began to form a discrete, coherent group, they engaged in a

¹ G.B. Warden, *Boston: 1689-1776* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 122.

² *Boston News-Letter*, April 1, 1737.

³ Paul Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 10.

series of sensational protests that challenged the vision of corporate communalism pushed by the town's political and moral leaders. Through minor riots and major crowd actions like the market riot of 1737 and the 1747 Knowles Riot, Boston's cohesive working community sought redress for shared grievances, asserted their own unique cultural viewpoint, and challenged the hierarchical leadership of Boston's upper classes.

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Despite the possibility of public violence, Bostonians in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries considered themselves a single entity through the ideology of corporate communalism. A governing sentiment that was widely adhered to throughout the British Empire, corporate communalism was the belief that all individuals were part of a single whole and that personal interests were secondary to the public good.⁴ As Gary Nash notes, every level of society was organized around the concept of commonwealths. The family unit, the town, and the colony, were conceived of as commonwealths in which “the corporate whole, not the individual, was the conceptual unit.”⁵ This inherently hierarchical ideology was seen to be an ideal method of encouraging deference towards authority figures as well as a way to overcome divisions among interest groups. As long as every level of society acted with the best interests of the community in mind, there would be no reason to doubt an individual's actions. Within corporate communalism, English and colonial officials could tolerate riots since it was understood that laborers were often policing those who were at odds with the common good.⁶ The English colonists who settled Boston in the seventeenth century brought the ideology with them to North America and established their community in accordance with its precepts.

⁴ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 9.

⁵ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 2.

⁶ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 10.

Through the lens of corporate communalism, early colonial Bostonians conceived of crowd actions as valuable services to the community that directly influenced public discourse.

England's North American settler societies accepted the hierarchical structure of corporate communalism as a natural extension of monarchy. As Ian McConville explains, "All those living then believed society should be shaped somehow like a pyramid...Most European thinkers saw a monarch of one sort or another as crucial to their happiness and safety."⁷ Even in seventeenth century Massachusetts, where early Puritan and Pilgrim settlements had exhibited a degree of democracy, colonists organized their congregations "by social rank, age, and gender."⁸ As part of the corporate hierarchy, community members accepted the governance of their leaders as long as they possessed a high social status, displayed honesty and virtue, and acted justly towards all classes of people.⁹ Without a landed aristocracy, this leadership class was not as delineated, but seventeenth and eighteenth century colonists accepted the hierarchy as a normal part of their monarchical social structure.

Within the corporate commonwealth, inhabitants organized according to a hierarchical social structure. Boston's African American and Native American slave population, which had in 1690 become the largest concentration of people of color in New England, stood at the lowest level of the social order.¹⁰ Bostonians had begun enslaving Native Americans in 1637 after the Pequot War. Taken as captives, many of

⁷ Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise & Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 21.

⁸ McConville, 25.

⁹ T.H. Breen, *The Character of a Good Ruler: Puritan Political Ideas in New England, 1630-1730* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), 8-12.

¹⁰ James Horton and Lois Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

them noncombatants, Native American slaves were “disposted aboute in the townes” to work as servants or sold to the Caribbean to help boost Atlantic trade.¹¹ In the wake of King Philip’s War, New Englanders once again took hundreds of Native Americans as slaves, bestowed them upon soldiers as war booty, sold them at urban markets, or shipped them throughout the Atlantic World. As Boston evolved into a society with slaves, the town’s merchants played a key role in dispersing and selling Native American slaves at ports throughout the British Atlantic. Although the enslavement of New England natives largely ended after King Philip’s War in 1676, Bostonians would continue to own and import Indian slaves from other parts of North America throughout the early eighteenth century.¹²

As the New England colonies took steps to regulate the taking of slaves and slavery in general, they passed laws that placed a harsher burden on Native American slaves when compared to other unfree forms of labor. This connection between race and enslavement strengthened over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as Massachusetts imported increasing numbers of African slaves. The colony legalized the purchase of slaves from “legitimate” slave trades in 1645, a year after the first Boston merchants sent ships to participate directly in the African slave trade.¹³ By the turn of the eighteenth century, Boston had become New England’s preeminent slaving port and in 1704, the first notice advertising African slaves for sale appeared in a Boston

¹¹ Margaret Ellen Newell, “Indian Slavery in Colonial New England,” in *Indian Slavery in Colonial America*, ed. Allan Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 37.

¹² Newell, 50.

¹³ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 10; Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England: 1620-1776* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 20.

newspaper.¹⁴ First imported primarily from the West Indies and other slave societies throughout British North America, Bostonians increasingly imported slaves directly from Africa by the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁵

Like Native Americans, African Americans entered into a system that kept them in bondage but also afforded them some degree of legal and property rights. As a result, Native American and African American slaves were understood to be both property and members of the British Empire.¹⁶ Marginalized by a legal and social system that increasingly equated people of color with servile status, Boston's Native American and African American slaves endured within an urban environment that marked them as inferior while simultaneously grouping them with other laborers within the British hierarchy. With this ambiguous dual status, Boston's enslaved people of color would find themselves in certain instances forming personal bonds with white laborers and falling victim to racist attacks in others.

Due to their typically poor status and lack of personal freedom stipulated by the contracts under which they worked, apprentices and hired servants sat one rung above slaves in the British society hierarchy. Bound to strict terms, during which they were supposed to learn a trade or other desirable economic skills, these workers toiled for a number of years before they could establish their independence.¹⁷ Although indentured servants did enter and work in the town in the early colonial era, the practice was never a meaningful segment of Boston's laboring force in the early colonial era. Instead,

¹⁴ Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 22; Robert Desrochers Jr., "Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 59, no. 3, *Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Jul., 2002): 623.

¹⁵ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 11-13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 7.

Bostonians more often hired unskilled laborers, including both white European immigrants and free blacks, to build maritime infrastructure, load, unload, and man ships, and fuel Boston's spread out over the Shawmut Peninsula.¹⁸ Taken together, these unskilled workers ranked above both slaves and bound apprentices and constituted almost half of Boston's population throughout the eighteenth century. Ranked higher as a result of their economic outlook and trained skills were journeymen artisans, small traders, and shop owners. These individuals often held a small amount of property and had the potential to join the higher ranks as master craftsmen and merchants, but could easily be reduced to abject poverty by personal tragedy or economic calamity. Considered as a whole, this multiracial group of skilled and unskilled laborers constituted the lower, or meaner, sort in accordance with the groups used by contemporary observers.¹⁹

The lower sort, however, did not completely constitute Boston's laboring population. Master craftsmen and independent tradesmen occupied an overlapping position within both the lower and middling sorts. In Boston, the middling sort consisted of yeoman farmers, successful traders, aspiring merchants, and master artisans. If master craftsmen found commercial success, they could own their own businesses, hire journeymen, and enjoy the economic stability, independence, and upward mobility that characterized the middling ranks. If their ventures failed, however, artisans could find themselves in the town's almshouse or working under another master as a journeyman. This range of economic experiences roughly reflected the status and wealth afforded to different occupations. As Gary Nash explains, "Everyone knew that artisans working with precious metals got ahead faster than those who worked at cobbler's bench and that

¹⁸ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 7; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 43.

¹⁹ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 23.

house carpenters were far more likely to become property owners than were tailors and stocking weavers.”²⁰ Similarly, Billy G. Smith in his study of Philadelphia argues that the lower end of the economic scale, "where tailors, shoemakers, and coopers congregated, had much in common with merchant seamen and laborers, sharing low wages, uncertain prospects of advancement, and usually, a position of propertylessness that also meant disenfranchisement."²¹

As Boston suffered through boom and bust cycles over the course of the eighteenth century, vulnerable artisans and farmers experienced the economic frustrations commonly felt by the town’s lower sort and rioted alongside them in crowd actions. Often giving voice to the grievances felt by unskilled laborers through their participation in town meetings, struggling tradesmen drifted between the middling and lower sort depending on the economic climate. While this ambiguous status would shift dramatically after the American Revolution, tradesmen formed part of Boston’s laboring population during the early colonial era.

While the boundary between the lower and middling sorts throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remained muddled, Bostonians more easily recognized the top tier of the British hierarchy. In each province, the governors (with the exception of Connecticut and Rhode Island), symbolized the preeminent royal figure and the tip of the pyramid.²² Using the authority bestowed upon them by Parliament, royal governors appointed subordinate officials within the colonies based on “Birth, his

²⁰ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 8.

²¹ Billy G. Smith, *The Lower Sort: Philadelphia’s Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 5.

²² McConville, *The King’s Three Faces*, 148; Patricia Bonomi, *The Lord Cornbury Scandal: The Politics of Reputation in British America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

property, his Friends, and his own Merit.”²³ These political appointments, including offices like lieutenant governor, seats on the governor’s Council, and customs commissioner, announced who could be counted as a colony’s political elite and formed one of three categories within the upper classes.

Boston’s appointed political officials were most often drawn from its most respected families. Educated individuals like doctors, clergy, teachers, and lawyers constituted another category, gaining social stature through their service to the community and their high level of education. Merchants, importers, and successful ship captains formed the third constituency and were respected for their wealth and economic influence. Taken together, these three groupings made up Boston’s upper classes and constituted the town’s political, social, and economic elites.²⁴

Although Bostonians sought to replicate the British social hierarchy throughout the early colonial period, its structure was generally more compressed in comparison to the English metropole. As Gordon Wood explains, "all the topmost tiers of English society were missing in America. There were no dukes, no marquesses, no court, and nothing like the fabulous wealth of the English nobility."²⁵ Early colonial Boston was home to some of the wealthiest men in colonial North America, but they paled in comparison to aristocracy and economic elites of England. In addition, Boston's laboring population never reached the level of poverty seen in English and other European cities. While African and Native Americans slaves and servants experienced more brutal treatment than bound labor in England, white workers could rely on a minimal standard

²³ McConville, *The King's Three Faces*, 148.

²⁴ Nancy Cott, "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (October 1, 1976): 588; Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 9.

²⁵ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 112.

of living that protected them from starvation. Taken together, Bostonians arranged themselves in accordance with the British social structure, but lived within a truncated version of the monarchical order.²⁶

In order to prove their social preeminence, the town's upper classes reinforced the hierarchical and economic distance between themselves and the rest of the town through a cultural divide common to the British Empire and European colonial society as a whole. Described in terms of patricians and plebeians by E.P. Thompson and others, this split marked the division between “the rulers and the ruled, the high and the low people, persons of substance and of independent estate and the loose and disorderly sort.”²⁷ This framework, operating in conjunction with corporate communalism and the formal British hierarchy, stipulated that the social and economic elites within a community maintained a mandate that guided a community and controlled its institutions.²⁸ Seeking control over community affairs, the patricians used their social and economic power to command deferential behavior from the middling and lower sort.

Plebeians, on the other hand, deferred to their social betters within the paternalistic system but believed they held veto power in the event that their leaders did not look out for the common good. Drawing upon Anglo-American traditions of social inversion rituals and misrule, the plebeians argued that they could challenge deference when individuals operated in their own self-interest.²⁹ In Boston, this cultural split set the town’s elites against the laboring population. In the traditional formulation of patricians and plebeians, the middling sort remained at an ambiguous halfway point, and

²⁶ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 123.

²⁷ E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York: The New Press, 1991), 57.

²⁸ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

subsequently offered “little deflection of the essential polarities.”³⁰ In Boston, however, the middling sort found itself pulled in opposite directions by two contradictory cultural trends. From one side, master craftsmen and other middling individuals sought to closely align themselves with the patricians in the hopes of gaining eventual entry into the upper classes. Following elite tastes in clothing, furnishings, and behavior, many middling Bostonians over the course of the eighteenth century accepted the leadership of the patricians and distanced themselves from the lower sort.³¹ As this process developed throughout the eighteenth century, however, vulnerable craftsmen experienced eroding financial stability as economic hardship repeatedly struck the town. Subsequently, these craftsmen, many of whom had risen through the ranks of the lower sort as apprentices and journeymen, began to challenge the leadership that had seemingly led Boston astray. These independent but financially unstable craftsmen reinvested in the cultural traditions of the lower sort, drew closer to the town’s plebeians, and counted themselves as members of the town’s laboring population.

Despite the social and cultural divisions within this complex urban environment, all Bostonians agreed with the fundamental tenet of corporate communalism that the town would be best served if the upper classes acted selflessly and for the common good. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Boston officials seized upon this role by encouraging what they believed to be the ideal community. The town's leaders drew upon theories of community and order and imposed regulations that would promote a set of moral guidelines that Edmund Morgan has termed “the Puritan Ethic.”³² Developing out

³⁰ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 56.

³¹ Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

³² Breen, *The Character of a Good Ruler*, 4; Edmund S. Morgan, “The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 1967): 4–43.

of corporate communalism in early colonial North America, the Puritan Ethic served to reinforce and the community ideology by instilling specific desired values within its inhabitants. Within the Puritan Ethic, men and women were expected to fulfill their “calling” by working in an occupation that benefitted society as a whole. Officials sought to foster individuals who would value industry and frugality, shun avarice and opulent prosperity, and seek challenges to improve themselves and their community.³³ As long as each individual acted to better their society, the community would benefit as a whole.

Seventeenth century Bostonians relied upon the theory of corporate communalism not only to maintain internal order, but to protect themselves from external threats as well. After King Philip’s War lead to intense and brutal fighting between English colonists and Native Americans throughout New England, Bostonians sought to draw a clear distinction between their urban society and Native Americans on the frontier. Although the bulk of the fighting had occurred around rural frontier towns, Bostonians panicked in April 1676 after five hundred Nipmucks attacked the town of Sudbury, only twenty miles away from their homes.³⁴ In the winter of 1675, Bostonians also found themselves host to an internment camp after colonial officials seized hundreds of Christian Native Americans from neutral native settlements like Natick and relocated them to Deer Island in the Boston Harbor. In February 1676, rumors spread that the Native Americans, furious with their poor treatment, forced relocation, and awful living conditions, planned to escape the island and attack Boston.³⁵ In response, Bostonians

³³ Morgan, “The Puritan Ethic,” 7.

³⁴ Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 98.

³⁵ Lepore, *The Name of War*, 140. The Christian Indians had remained neutral during the early months of the war despite English fears that they would readily join the enemy. The drastic move and overall unfair treatment of Indians during the war convinced some native groups, including the Wamesit, to leave Massachusetts entirely.

petitioned colonial officials demanding stronger measures be taken to protect the town from Native Americans and that the Christian Indians be sent “some place more farther from us.”³⁶

King Philip’s War, as well as the belief that the conflict was divine punishment for moral and societal failings, helped convinced Bostonians of the necessity for hierarchical and religious order.³⁷ Many English colonists feared that without a renewed commitment to public virtues and decorum, their settler societies would embrace the Native American presence and become “savage” themselves.³⁸ As a result, Bostonians, and New England colonists as a whole, emphasized the modern order of English civilization versus the imagined wild and superstitious traditions of Native American life.³⁹ Seeking both to separate and elevate themselves from the region’s Native American population, Bostonians in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century emphasized the importance of corporate communalism to protect themselves from Native American on the frontier and to strengthen their English society and customs.

Boston’s patricians reinforced corporate communalism and social order through laws that would align the town’s behavior with the Puritan Ethic. Using their positions as moral authorities, clergymen like Samuel Sewall and Cotton Mather sought policies that would improve public conduct and “prevent the growth of intemperance and debauchery by all possible means.”⁴⁰ To encourage personal industry, for instance, Massachusetts required that “all parents and masters do breed and bring up their children and

³⁶ Lepore, *The Name of War*, 140.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁹ Jean M. O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4.

⁴⁰ David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink & The Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 64.

apprentices in some honest lawful calling, labour, or employment, either in husbandry or some other trade, profitable for themselves and the commonwealth.”⁴¹ To discourage laborers from opulence and waste, the Massachusetts General Court banned any person whose estate was valued less than two hundred pounds from wearing gold or silver lace, buttons, and tiffany hoods or scarves.⁴² The legislators argued that not only did wearing lace encourage “the consumption of estates,” but it also violated the corporate social hierarchy by encouraging “men or women of mean condition, educations, and callings” to “take upon them the garb of gentlemen.”⁴³ In pursuit of the ideal community, colonial officials regularly intervened to align personal deportment with the Puritan Ethic.

* * *

These efforts also included prohibiting what the upper and middling classes considered deviant or immoral behavior. As early as 1646, for example, Massachusetts banned shuffleboard and bowling in taverns and other “houses of common entertainment” because the games wasted both time and alcohol.⁴⁴ Five years later, Massachusetts imposed fines on any “divers loose, vain and corrupt persons” who enticed children, servants, or apprentices away “from their callings, studies and honest occupations, and lodging places, to the dishonour of God, and grief of their parents, and masters, tutors, guardians and overseers &c.”⁴⁵ As the colonial era progressed, Boston officials would increasingly target “loose, vain, and corrupt persons” for acting contrary

⁴¹ Massachusetts General Court, *The Charter and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay* (Boston: T.B. Wait and Co., 1814), 74.

⁴² *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, ed. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, vol. 3 (Boston: State Printer, 1854), 243.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Massachusetts General Court, *The Charter and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 118.

⁴⁵ Massachusetts General Court, *The Charter and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 75.

to the Puritan Ethic. While officials found it difficult to monitor and punish personal behavior, the repeated attempts through updated laws and ecclesiastical courts suggest that Boston's upper classes believed the regulations made a difference. More often than not, these edicts focused on the lower sort and enabled the upper classes greater leeway to align plebeian culture with their social ideal.

While corporate communalism served to bind Boston's community together in the seventeenth century, new social and economic realities would begin to strain the ideology at the turn of the eighteenth century. In the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, Parliament instituted a series of holidays designed to inspire national patriotism and establish a set of shared cultural experiences throughout England and the disparate British colonies. To the dismay of religious leaders like Samuel Sewall, Bostonians, many of whom by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries bore no religious or familial ties to the original Puritan mission, readily accepted the holidays. As explained by Brendan McConville, even those Bostonians who could trace their ancestry to the original Puritan settlers transitioned from describing their society as a religious covenant to viewing it as an "imperial contract."⁴⁶ Replacing Puritan religiosity with English nationalism, Bostonians consciously pivoted away from their errand into the wilderness and focused their attention on the British Atlantic.

As the town tied itself closer to the British metropole and the Atlantic economy, Boston's merchants used their economic power to influence colonial and English politics and ensure that their interests would always be protected.⁴⁷ This rapid push for self-interest and personal advancement clashed with the traditional concept of the corporate

⁴⁶ McConville, *The King's Three Faces*, 51.

⁴⁷ Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 189.

whole.⁴⁸ Throughout the seventeenth century, Boston's craftsmen had been able to rely upon the city's elites to establish economic protections and protect trade monopolies in the name of the common good. Throughout the seventeenth century, Boston's craftsmen had been able to rely upon the city's elites to establish economic protections and protect trade monopolies in the name of the common good. As early as 1644, Boston's shipbuilders organized into a chartered company and in 1648 the town's shoemakers successfully formed a guild to regulate the quality and prices of shoes.⁴⁹ Boston officials further expanded the regulation of artisan trades in 1657 and 1660 by decreeing that no person could open a shop or work a trade until they had completed a seven-year apprenticeship and reached twenty-one years of age.⁵⁰ These regulations allowed Boston's workers to replicate the craft system found throughout the British Empire and limited the potential labor pool that merchants and other employers could draw upon.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, Boston's merchants began to act for their own collective benefit rather than those of the commonwealth. While clergy and other moral authorities lamented the turn towards economic self-interest, many Bostonians accepted the shift in the short-term because it came at a time of overall prosperity. During Queen Anne's War, Boston found itself with a significant economic advantage over other colonial ports as British victories against the French and Spanish allowed British Atlantic trade to flourish. Due to a wartime shipbuilding boom, Boston's maritime fleet ranked third among English ports, with only London and Bristol surpassing its shipping

⁴⁸ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 11.

⁴⁹ Richard Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), 139.

⁵⁰ *Second Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston: Containing the Boston Records, 1634-1660, and the Book of Possessions* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1881), 157.

capability.⁵¹ Some Bostonians accused the town's patricians of acting against the common good to improve their social and financial fortunes, but the commercial boom allowed the town to temporarily flourish and subsequently muted real opposition. In the subsequent decades, however, the excessive reliance on Atlantic trade ensured that the town's economy would rise and fall based on the security of England's Atlantic empire. As eighteenth century Boston repeatedly experienced wartime recessions and other economic calamities, the laboring population would come to find that the economic shift among the town's merchants had brought them severe hardship.

Even during prosperous times, Boston's laboring population found it difficult to improve their economic position and rise in the social ranks. In addition to the strict trade monopolies and the mandate that artisans complete an apprenticeship to work in the town, families were required to pay an indenture fee for their sons to enter these trades. Masters charged a higher fee for more profitable trades and Boston authorities monitored apprenticeships to ensure that fee discounts or reduced requirements were not given to relatives of master artisans.⁵² For Boston's poorer laborers, this often meant that more lucrative trades remained out of reach. Josiah Franklin, for instance, could not afford the indenture fee for his son Benjamin to become a cutler and instead paid his older son James to apprentice Benjamin as a printer.⁵³ Similarly, George Robert Twelves Hewes was unable to follow his father into the tannery business due to the family's precarious finances. After George's father died in 1749, the payment of indentures for him and his three brothers was left to his uncle Robert, a gluemaker. Unable to pay the indenture fees

⁵¹ Wesley Craven, *The Colonies in Transition: 1660-1713* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 307.

⁵² Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America*, 147.

⁵³ Alfred Fabian Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 19.

for all four brothers, Samuel and Solomon became fishermen, Shubael was apprenticed as a butcher, and George Robert became a shoemaker. Considered to be the lowest of the artisan trades in the American colonies, Boston's master shoemakers were often forced to reverse the indenture transaction and pay a family to obtain an apprentice.⁵⁴

Though these obstacles prevented certain laborers from joining the middling sort, they also served to bring workers closer together in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Unlike Philadelphia and New York, Boston was especially sensitive to the commercial instability caused by imperial conflicts and experienced a gradual decline between Queen Anne's War and the American Revolution.⁵⁵ During this time, Boston's economy lost the brief advantage it had held during Queen Anne's War as smaller New England ports matured and diverted business away from the town's mercantile and shipbuilding interests. During the 1730s, Boston shipbuilders regularly constructed ships totaling 6,000 tons. By 1755, tonnage had plummeted to 2,162.⁵⁶

As Boston's chief industry declined, the town experienced a prolonged cycle of inflation after Massachusetts issued paper money to cover lingering military expenditures. Facing a reduction in real wages and unable to take advantage of the economic opportunities available to the town's middling and upper class inhabitants, Boston's eighteenth-century laborers explored alternative forms of employment to maintain their independence. While Boston's upper classes continued to pursue opulent wealth, the town's laborers found little assistance from economic and political leaders and fought for financial subsistence. Through expanding their trades to include new

⁵⁴ Alfred Fabian Young, "George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742-1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 38, no. 4 (Oct, 1981): 574.

⁵⁵ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 70.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

services, selling seasonal goods, nursing, and sewing, Boston's laboring population found that the immediate fight for economic survival was more common than upward social advancement. Separated from their wealthier neighbors by financial hardship, Boston's laborers drew closer together through their common economic experience.

Although Boston remained one of North America's preeminent eighteenth-century ports and boasted a population of 17,000 by the mid-1740s, the town's stagnant economy rendered it difficult for laborers and artisans to subsist on their trades alone.⁵⁷ In response, members of Boston's laboring population often expanded their businesses to include services that went beyond their occupations. In 1737, George and Robert Hewes, two tanners located in the South End of Boston, advertised that they would now be selling "good hard and soft soap" "at a very reasonable price."⁵⁸ As the years progressed, George and Robert continued to expand beyond tanning until George could describe his occupation as "butchering, tallow chandlery, hog killing, soap boiling etc."⁵⁹ Forced to find new ways to support his family, George Hewes went so far as to temporarily charge for exhibiting an opossum in his home in 1737.⁶⁰ While Boston would later be home to many traveling menageries and other exhibitions, Hewes's entrepreneurship was rare for the 1730s and reinforces his need to branch out beyond his occupation to provide for his family.

Boston's laboring population also turned to seasonal goods to avoid slipping into poverty. For example, Edward Alderchurch, a ropemaker by trade, advertised in the *Boston Evening Post* in 1740 that he had "Choice good Carolina Pork and Rice" available

⁵⁷ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 73.

⁵⁸ *Boston Evening Post*, April 11, 1737.

⁵⁹ Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 18.

⁶⁰ *Boston Evening Post*, May 23, 1737.

for purchase. Similarly, Samuel Fulton, a gardener, offered “Good Green Pease...near the Rev. Mr. Checkley’s Meeting-House” in both 1738 and 1739.⁶¹ By 1740, Fulton found himself in competition with Primus, a free black gardener selling peas a few houses away.⁶² While it is unclear how profitable the temporary sale of seasonal goods could be, the prevalence of these advertisements suggests it was a viable strategy for workers to supplement their incomes.

Like their male counterparts, Boston’s female workers also took advantage of temporary employment to improve their economic outlook. Throughout the colonial era, Boston’s women labored as domestic servants, seamstresses, and as clerks or owners of small shops to support both themselves and their families. Depending on their economic circumstances, single women, wives, and widows sought the employment opportunities usually open to women in order to support themselves, supplement their husbands’ incomes, or their families as heads of household. When these measures proved financially insufficient, women turned to alternative options in order to make ends meet. Some women, usually younger wives, sought employment as wet nurses through advertisements placed in Boston’s newspapers. For example, the *Boston Evening Post* alerted Bostonians in 1738 that “A Young Woman with a good Breast of Milk wants to take a Child into the House to Suckle, or will go into a good Family.”⁶³ Similarly, a woman in 1739 informed readers that she was “with a very good Breast of Milk” and was “willing to go into a Family to Suckle a Child.”⁶⁴ When possible, wet nurses also specified the conditions for their employment, stating that they desired to “go into a

⁶¹ *Boston Evening Post*, June 19, 1738; *Boston Evening Post*, June 11, 1739.

⁶² *Boston Evening Post*, June 23, 1740.

⁶³ *Boston Evening Post*, July 24, 1738.

⁶⁴ *Boston Evening Post*, November 5, 1739.

Gentleman's Family," to only nurse white children, or to also work as a housekeeper.⁶⁵ Although it is unclear from the brief, anonymous postings, the stipulations suggest that some free African American families may have sought wet nurses through these advertisements. In these instances, laboring women revealed their personal aspirations towards respectability as well as their prejudices towards people of color. Even during dire economic circumstances, Boston's colonial workers could pass up potential work if it clashed with their social and cultural mentality.

These anonymous advertisements also revealed the circumstances that led working women to offer their services as a wet nurse. In 1753, the *Boston Gazette* notified their readers that there was "A Wet Nurse in Town, with a good Breast of Milk, about a Fortnight old, having bury'd her Child."⁶⁶ Similarly, the *Boston News Letter* in 1767 printed an advertisement describing "A Woman with a young Breast, whose Child died a few days ago."⁶⁷ For these women, the need to provide for their families compelled them to place advertisements immediately after the loss of a child. While these specific details were not often provided to colonial printers, the frequency of wet nurse advertisements suggests that Boston's economy forced women to turn tragedy into a commercial opportunity.

Women also sought to supplement their incomes through instruction in sewing and needlework. The services offered, as well as the possibility for instruction, varied based on the economic standing of the women involved. On the lower end of the spectrum, women like Mrs. Mary Crabb solicited "drawing and imbroidering" work but

⁶⁵ *Boston Gazette*, May 31, 1748; *Boston Gazette*, April 6, 1761; *Boston Evening Post*, April 28, 1745; *Boston News-Letter*, May 26, 1763.

⁶⁶ *Boston Gazette*, November 20, 1753.

⁶⁷ *Boston News-Letter*, January 29, 1767.

could not offer instruction. Living near Fisher's Wharf in the South End, Crabb was likely a widow or wife of a struggling tradesman seeking to support her family.⁶⁸ More commonly, the women who took in or taught needlework possessed more substantial means. In 1739, for instance, Mrs. Margaret Laitaill announced that she would teach "all sorts of Needle Work, Tapestry, Embroidering, and Marking" at her home "next Door to the Sign of the White Horse."⁶⁹ Similarly, Jean Day informed readers in 1767 that she would be opening a school at her House on Queen Street to "teach all Kinds of fine Needle Work as usual."⁷⁰ These women, usually middling or even upper class widows and wives, could even transform sewing schools into larger, permanent enterprises. In 1764, the *Boston Gazette* advertised for a school run by Mrs. Oliver, "where Youth may be accomodated with Board, or half Board as suits, as well as Tuition, at reasonable Rates." Similarly, Hannah Hutchinson temporarily converted the Green Dragon Tavern into a sewing school in 1744 and provided boarding for rural students.⁷¹ While the women who taught needlework skewed towards the middling and upper class ranks, women of all economic backgrounds sought sewing work to support either themselves or their families.

By seeking temporary or alternative employment to supplement their incomes, male and female laborers demonstrated their resiliency in an unfavorable economic climate. Forced into unconventional pursuits by a chronic lack of commercial opportunity, laborers lived in an urban economic environment that was distinct from that of middling and upper class Bostonians. As the eighteenth century progressed, workers

⁶⁸ *Boston Post Boy*, May 6, 1751.

⁶⁹ *Boston Evening Post*, May 21, 1739.

⁷⁰ *Boston Evening Post*, April 20, 1767.

⁷¹ *Boston Post-Boy*, June 18, 1744.

developed a separate cultural outlook that reflected their economic survival strategies. Workers came to believe that the moral economy that was supposed to accompany corporate communalism had been replaced by a system that benefitted the upper classes alone. Without an economic system that provided for the common good, laborers explored alternative ways to supplement their incomes. When these measures proved insufficient, workers turned to public poor relief as well as less reputable pursuits. Through taverns, disorderly houses, and dram shops, Boston's laboring community utilized whatever means available to them to maintain their financial independence and provide for their families.

Boston's laboring population embraced liquor and liquor licenses as a viable commercial opportunity due to the town's insatiable demand for alcohol throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. If they were able to obtain a legal license, male and female laborers primarily sold alcohol out of their homes. This strategy was particularly ideal for those who lived in areas frequently trafficked by other members of the laboring community. In 1754, for example, Isaac Dafforne, a cooper, believed that he would be very successful selling alcohol since his home was located "near Mr. Hallowell's Shipyard, where great numbers of People, Sailors, and others are Employed."⁷²

If they possessed the necessary means, Boston's laborers opened separate small goods shops in areas populated by the clientele described in Dafforne's petition. As a major colonial seaport, Boston saw a steady flow of seamen entering the town to either return to their permanent homes or temporarily reside in the town's boarding houses and tenements. Shop owners frequently tailored their inventories to these individuals by

⁷² Petition of Isaac Dafforne, July 1754, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

selling small quantities of staple goods. Benjamin Eaton, a hatter, and his wife, sold “Bread, Sugar, Cotton, wool, and such like things” after his business was “almost broke up...in the Expedition against Canada.”⁷³ Similarly, John Doble, a cooper, testified in 1754 that he had opened a shop selling “Cottonwool, Sugar, Bread, Butter, and many other things” after a “weakness of Body” had prevented him from making barrels.⁷⁴

Many shop owners believed that selling liquor, legally or illegally, gave them an advantage over their competitors. Samuel Fletcher stated in 1759 that he had been selling rum because “[the coasters and fishermen] are frequently wanting.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Joshua Young admitted to selling liquor without a license, but stated that by not doing so, “a great Inconvenience attends him as well as the Fisherman, for want of such a Liberty.”⁷⁶ Others, like William Maxwell in 1749, argued that staple goods alone were insufficient to “to gain a livelihood” and believed that liquor would improve their financial prospects.⁷⁷

For those who owned or rented a larger building, taverns were seen as a reliably profitable option. In 1754, Robert Watt Johnson insisted that he would be greatly benefitted by turning his home on Dock Square into a tavern for the “Butchers, Farmers, and others” in the area.⁷⁸ Some widows even sought to claim tavern licenses formerly held by their deceased husbands. Mary Pierce’s husband had kept a tavern near “Searlet’s Wharfe known by the Sign of the Queen’s Head.” Eighteen months after his death in

⁷³ Petition of Benjamin Eaton, July 1754, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁷⁴ Petition of John Doble, c. July 1754, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁷⁵ Petition of Samuel Fletcher, July 1759, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁷⁶ Petition of Joshua Young, June 1753, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁷⁷ Petition of William Maxwell, July 1749, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁷⁸ Petition of Robert Watt Johnson, July 1754, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

1754, Pierce repaired the tavern, moved into the building, and rendered it “in every way Convenient for a Publick house... with all her Utensils, Beds, Liquors, & etc.”⁷⁹ Not only did Pierce state that the building had “for time immemorial” been used as a tavern, but Pierce asserted she had “the whole Management thereof in her husband’s life time” and as a result would have no problem running an independent business.⁸⁰

Through rum, small goods shops, and taverns, Boston’s laboring community embraced alcohol as a means of securing economic independence. Rather than simply accepting public charity, Boston’s workers explored ways to piece together a stable income within Boston’s maritime economy. By obtaining liquor licenses, laborers demonstrated their economic ingenuity, asserted their desire for financial autonomy, and promoted their own cultural viewpoints concerning alcohol.

By selling alcohol to other workers out of their homes and businesses, laborers also fostered personal connections within their neighborhoods. Especially for shops and taverns in highly trafficked areas, alcohol brought workers into contact with one another outside of their occupations. Laborers developed these casual connections into social and kinship bonds at taverns, public houses, and private homes. While most private gatherings remained small affairs, some laborers transformed their homes into disorderly houses, and offered recreation to a larger clientele.

Laborers ran disorderly houses, typically described as underground taverns, out of their homes. In these private spaces, workers sold illegal alcohol and provided a private entertainment to other members of the lower sort. Workers also ran bawdy houses, which

⁷⁹ Petition of Mary Pierce, July 1754, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁸⁰ Petition of Mary Pierce, July 1754, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

combined a tavern and a brothel into a single illicit institution. Both disorderly and bawdy houses were extremely common throughout the British Atlantic. In Philadelphia, for instance, alarmed observers described the businesses as locations where “all the loose and idle characters of the city, whether whites, blacks, or mulattoes...indulge in riotous mirth and dancing till the dawn.”⁸¹ African Americans often appeared in newspaper and court descriptions of disorderly houses because affluent Anglo-Americans feared having slaves congregate outside of their control. Subsequently, white officials frequently associated any gathering or activity that allowed African Americans to escape their oversight with danger and disorder. This emphasis on racial control and segregation also encouraged colonial authorities to regulate interracial spaces whenever they could be found. While it is unclear exactly how profitable disorderly houses were for their operators, Boston’s laborers risked steep fines and public censure to illegally sell alcohol and revel with other workers.

According to a 1750 letter submitted to the *Boston Gazette*, disorderly houses were a common sight within Boston’s laboring neighborhoods, especially in the town’s North End. The anonymous author asserted that if illegal taverns and disorderly houses were added to the one hundred and fifty-seven licensed taverns in the town, “an Eighth Part of our Houses are either Dram Shops or Taverns.”⁸² Based on a 1765 selectmen report, this would place the number of disorderly houses at fifty-two.⁸³ While likely an exaggeration, the author’s estimate suggests that workers frequented disorderly houses enough to render them a viable business opportunity. Popular as both financial

⁸¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 8, 1787.

⁸² “To the Publishers of the Boston Gazette,” *Boston Gazette*, July 17, 1750.

⁸³ An Account of the Houses, Family, White People, Negroes, Molattoes, and Indians in the Town of Boston, May 16, 1765, Boston Town Papers, Vol. 7, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

opportunities and places of recreation, disorderly houses allowed laborers to congregate with one another and facilitate personal and community connections.

Shared economic experiences and social institutions allowed Boston's laboring population to develop personal bonds, kinship networks, and shared cultural values over the early decades of the eighteenth century. As laborers embraced alcohol and disorderly houses as illicit mainstays within their neighborhoods, they drew the attention of Boston's political and moral authorities. Officials feared that if the town's workers continued to fraternize and develop their own social norms, they would neither obey the tenets of the Puritan Ethic nor pay deference in accordance with the British social hierarchy. As a result, Boston's leaders singled out the working population for immoral conduct. By targeting workers as a specific group in need of regulation, officials drew a distinction between patrician values and plebeian cultural practices. Officials deemed laboring values abhorrent to the Puritan Ethic and encouraged middling and upper class Bostonians to avoid laboring neighborhoods and activities. Creating a divide between proper and improper behavior, Boston officials demanded that workers conform to their prescribed norms. Unwilling to do so, the regulatory actions encouraged the laborers to grow more insular and pushed the laboring population closer together.

Over the course of the early colonial era, Boston's laboring community developed a set of plebeian cultural values that set them apart from middling and upper class Bostonians. Inherited from English and European cultural traditions, these values reflected an older idea of society in which the community took precedence over the individual. In this formulation, face-to-face societies dealt with interpersonal issues as a

community at the expense of privacy and often outside the law.⁸⁴ Conceiving of their communities as tightly knit societies, individuals remained informed of each other's businesses and relationships through their personal kinship networks. This allowed laborers to be aware of issues like adultery, domestic abuse, or philandering and intervene on the aggrieved party's behalf.⁸⁵ With these issues more out in the open, Anglo-Americans developed specific cultural mores and rituals designed to solve personal problems and calm tensions within the community. In the words of Paul Gilje, plebeian culture "represented a rough kind of egalitarianism which asserted that every member of the community was entitled to a decent living."⁸⁶

While plebeian culture had roots well into the medieval era, the Anglo-American patricians sought to distance themselves from these practices by establishing their own cultural standards. Middling and upper class Bostonians believed that laboring cultural traditions, including violent actions like charivari, were signs that workers were a dangerous element within the town. In addition, as Native American and African American slavery came to be a permanent fixture within their community, officials grouped Anglo-American laboring traditions with the cultural mores practiced by people of color. Similar to the persistence of adultery and informal marriages among Anglo-Americans, for instance, Native Americans and African Americans accepted polygyny, premarital pregnancy, and divorce as aspects of their social traditions.⁸⁷ In contrast, patrician culture grew out of more modern English traditions and called for the primacy of government and law. Instead of rituals that decided interpersonal disputes, patricians

⁸⁴ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 12.

⁸⁵ Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 33.

⁸⁶ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 12.

⁸⁷ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 36.

avored the intervention of secular and religious courts. Placing their trust in higher authority, patricians desired a cultural system that valued hierarchy, paternalism, and deference.⁸⁸ Through prescriptions like the Puritan Ethic, patricians sought to instill values within the individual that would in turn benefit the community. Both patricians and plebeians sought to protect community interests in North American settlements, but the parties drew upon distinct aspects of English culture in order to do so.

In Boston, patrician officials first sought to impose the Puritan Ethic on Anglo-American workers by denying liquor licenses to the laboring poor. As early as 1704, the Massachusetts Assembly recommended that Boston officials refuse liquor petitions from widows and in 1712 the legislature required that all applicants “be persons of sober conversation, suitably qualified, and provided for the exercise of such an employment.”⁸⁹ Religious and political leaders pursued these restrictions based on deference and hierarchy. In their formulation, deference would prevent laborers from policing the behavior of middling and upper class patrons and encourage intoxication and bad behavior. Unable to command the authority necessary to control their customers, laborers could not be trusted with liquor licenses.⁹⁰

In light of this opposition, Boston’s workers learned to frame their license petitions in the language of the Puritan Ethic. John Osgood, for instance, testified that he had previously worked as a hatter “with great diligence and industry,” while Abraham Wood, a carter, wrote that he had always been “very industrious in his business and

⁸⁸ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 12.

⁸⁹ Massachusetts General Court, *The Charter and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 396.

⁹⁰ Conroy, *In Public Houses*, 396.

thereby maintain'd himself and family comfortably.⁹¹ Boston's laboring population also argued that liquor licenses would allow them to maintain themselves and their families without direct government assistance. Abraham Wood asserted at the end of his 1755 petition that a liquor license would allow him "to get Subsistence without being burthensome to the Town" while Seth Davis, after losing the use of his right hand, believed he would become "a Charge to my Friends or to the Town" if his petition were denied.⁹² Not only did this rhetoric play into the Puritan Ethic, but it also addressed the very real problem of poor relief that had overwhelmed the town's resources.⁹³ Although private charity offered through church congregations continued to be the primary method of assisting the poor, economic decline in the middle decades of the eighteenth century saw the burden of support increasingly fall upon Boston's government. Between 1715 and 1745, the amount Boston spent on poor relief increased tenfold and doubled again by 1748.⁹⁴

As the situation grew increasingly dire, Boston's social and religious leaders sought ways for the poor to defray the cost of their own assistance. Boston officials opened a workhouse in 1739, but the strict regulations on behavior and the requirement that laborers move into the building guaranteed that it was never home to more than a fraction of its maximum occupancy.⁹⁵ Boston's workers made it clear that they would rather fend for themselves because doing so meant they could remain in their own homes

⁹¹ Petition of John Osgood, July 1754, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.; Petition of Abraham Wood, July 1755, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁹² Petition of Seth Davis, August 1754, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁹³ Morgan, "The Puritan Ethic," 4.

⁹⁴ Nian-Sheng Huang, "Financing Poor Relief in Colonial Boston," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 8 (2006): 79.

⁹⁵ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 117.

and neighborhoods. By rejecting the solution endorsed by the town's moral and political leaders, laborers pressured officials to capitulate to their demands and issue liquor licenses as a method of poor relief.

Unable to prevent laborers from obtaining liquor licenses, Boston officials turned to regulating the behavior of drinking establishments that catered to workers. In 1712, for instance, Massachusetts imposed harsh penalties for “singing, fiddling, piping, or any other musick, dancing, or revelling” in taverns and outlawed “evil communication, wicked, profane, impure, filthy and obscene songs, composures, writings or prints...especially when digested, composed, or uttered in imitation or mockery of devotion or religious exercises.”⁹⁶ According to Boston's upper classes, taverns allowed laborers to ignore moral and civic norms and embrace their own coarse cultural traditions. An anonymous 1738 letter to the *Boston Evening Post* went as far as to suggest that taverns catering to laborers destroyed the town's family structure, as “the poor sort of People...are often swilling in the Tavern while their poor families are suffering for want of bread at Home.”⁹⁷ Restricting the types of activities that could occur in taverns, colonial officials sought to prevent the types of activities favored by workers and maintain a public standard of decorum.

While Boston officials found some success in policing licensed taverns, they were largely incapable of controlling bawdy and disorderly houses. Authorities sought to eliminate these businesses due to their blatant illegality and the illicit activity that they encouraged. Not only did these enterprises allow workers to drink and fraternize out of the public eye, but the institutions encouraged fraternization between black and white

⁹⁶ Massachusetts General Court, *The Charter and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 399.

⁹⁷ “To the Publisher of the Boston Evening Post,” *Boston Evening Post*, June 26, 1738.

laborers as well. In 1766, Rachel Hubbard, husband of mariner John Hubbard, was brought in front of the Court of the General Sessions of the Peace for maintaining a disorderly house over a period of nine months. Not only were Hubbard's patrons accused of "quarrelling and fighting, tipling and drinking to excess, and otherwise misbehaving themselves," but Hubbard's customers included "certain idle suspected persons of evil fame and conversation, as well as Negro Slaves as others."⁹⁸ Similarly, Nichols Butler, a wig maker, was also accused of running a disorderly house for nine months in 1770. According to the court, Butler entertained "certain dissolute, idle, suspected persons of evil fame and conversation as well as Negro Slaves."⁹⁹

Boston officials feared the interracial gatherings facilitated by bawdy and disorderly houses because they upset the social and racial hierarchy. By 1700, New Englanders had established a set of rules governing slavery that ensured the institution was equated with people of color.¹⁰⁰ Using race as a marker of bondage and servitude, Massachusetts officials pursued a social structure in which white supremacy was assured to all European colonists. In addition, theories of European and religious superiority combined to create a widely held belief that white colonists had been sanctioned by God to enslave African and Native Americans.¹⁰¹ Bawdy and disorderly houses, in which black and white laborers met and drank under the same roof, challenged the racial hierarchy demanded by New England slavery.

⁹⁸ Case of Rachel Hubbard, January 27, 1766, Court of General Sessions of the Peace, Suffolk County Court Records, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁹⁹ Case of Nicholas Butler, August 7, 1770, Court of General Sessions of the Peace, Suffolk County Court Records, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁰⁰ Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 35.

¹⁰¹ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 39.

While they struggled to stop these private gatherings, colonial officials made multiple attempts to prevent slaves and free blacks from congregating with each other and with white laborers. In 1746, for instance, Boston passed “An Act to Prevent Negroes Keeping Hoggs,” in which the town banned Indians and African Americans from raising swine because their maintenance gave them “an opportunity of meeting and conferring together.”¹⁰² This was followed by a grievance brought before the Boston town meeting in 1751 that “Negro and Indian Servants [were] getting into Companies in the Night, for Drinking, Gaming, Stealing, etc. and enticing white servants to join ‘em (of which there has lately been several Instances.)”¹⁰³ By 1759, the tendency for white, black, and Native American laborers to congregate together became so apparent that the town's selectmen threatened to revoke the license of any tavern keeper caught selling “Rum or any Liquors to Negroes or Mollatto Servants...without a written order from their respective Master or Mistresses.”¹⁰⁴ Since the Massachusetts Assembly had already banned the selling of liquor to “any apprentice, servant or negro” in 1698, the selectmen's statute suggests that liquor retailers routinely ignored these laws.¹⁰⁵ In 1762, widow Keriah Harvey argued as much in her liquor petition to the Boston selectmen. According to her testimony, Harvey

¹⁰² “An Act to Prevent Negroes Keeping Hoggs,” c. 1746, Boston Town Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts; Daniel Mandell, *Tribe, Race, History: Native Americans in Southern New England, 1780-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2008); Donna Keith Baron, J. Edward Hood, and Holly V. Izard, “They Were Here All Along: The Native American Presence in Lower-Central New England in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 53, no. 3, Indians, and Others in Early American (Jul., 1996): 561-586. While it is clear that Native Americans lived in Boston as both slaves and free laborers, it is nearly impossible to judge their numbers within the laboring community. By the mid-eighteenth century, Native Americans had begun regularly intermarrying with African Americans and colonial officials increasingly combined “Indians and Negroes” into one demographic category. As a result, some of the individuals considered “black” within Boston’s laboring community may actually have been Native American.

¹⁰³ James R. Green and Hugh Carter Donahue, *Boston’s Workers: A Labor History* (Boston Public Library, 1978), 7.

¹⁰⁴ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Boston Town Records, 1758 to 1769* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1886), 20.

¹⁰⁵ Massachusetts General Court, *The Charters and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 314.

had sold liquor out of her shop for twenty years until her license was suspended in 1761. After her renewal was declined, Harvey stated that “the only object as she has since learnt for said suspension, was a report that she had sold Spirit to a Negro Servant without an Order, *a common practice*.”¹⁰⁶ Harvey's testimony indicates that members of Boston's laboring community frequently ignored the legal proscriptions of the upper classes and welcomed the business brought by selling alcohol to Native Americans, African American slaves, and free blacks in their shops, taverns, and disorderly houses.

Boston officials also targeted underground laboring businesses because bawdy houses and to a lesser extent, disorderly houses, facilitated casual sexual encounters between laborers. In 1753, for instance, Hannah Dilley, wife of felt maker Thomas Dilley, was found guilty of allowing “men and women and other suspected persons and not of good behavior or fame to Resort to her husbands house and Carnally to lye with whores.”¹⁰⁷ While officials severely punished Dilley through public humiliation, Boston's laborers exhibited a moral code of ethics that allowed for both interracial sex and adultery.¹⁰⁸ Although it is difficult to quantify how common interracial sex was among Boston's inhabitants, Massachusetts officials sought to prevent the children of mixed ancestry as early as 1705 and slave for sale advertisements testified to the presence of “mulatto” slaves on Boston's streets.¹⁰⁹ Bawdy and disorderly houses, by fostering personal connections within Boston's laboring population, encouraged these sexual

¹⁰⁶ Petition of Keriah Harvey, July 19, 1762, Boston Town Papers, Vol. 6, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts; Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁷ Case of Hannah Dilley, April 30, 1753, Court of the General Sessions of the Peace, Suffolk County Court Records, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁰⁸ *Boston Evening Post*, May 14, 1753; Hannah Dilley was forced to stand on a stool outside the courthouse on King Street wearing a sign reading “A Procuress, and Keeper of a Bawdy House.”

¹⁰⁹ Massachusetts General Court, *The Charters and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts*, 747; *Boston Gazette*, July 2, 1739; *Boston Evening Post*, October 13, 1740.

encounters and provided a venue for workers to disregard upper class social and cultural edicts.

As informal institutions outside of moral and legal regulation, bawdy and disorderly houses also held the potential to encourage adultery within the laboring population. Like their laboring brethren throughout the Atlantic world, Boston's workers treated marriage, adultery, and infidelity in a manner that was distinct from patrician culture. According to the divorce petitions submitted to Massachusetts governors and cases brought before the Court of General Sessions of the Peace, adultery was relatively common among Boston's lower sort. For instance, Thomas Gelpin, a Boston mariner, petitioned Governor Shirley in 1743 for a divorce after his wife Abigail "was found naked in bed with one John Russell," tried and found guilty by a Justice of the Peace, and "whipt at the publick whipping post twenty stripes."¹¹⁰ According to the Justice, Thomas Hubbard, he deemed Abigail Gelpin guilty after a ropemaker and a shipwright had testified to seeing Abigail and John Russell naked in bed.¹¹¹

Divorce cases also revealed that laboring marriages could be communally but not legally recognized. In 1740, Eleanor Wells requested that Governor Jonathan Belcher grant her a divorce after her husband George "did wickedly and adulterously take one Eunice Delarance into his house and bed instead of the said Eleanor his Lawful Wife, and hath ever since lived in adultery with the said Eunice and rejected, refused, and turned away the said Eleanor."¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Petition of Thomas Gelpin of Boston, Mariner, August 1743, Massachusetts Archives Collection, Vol. 9 Domestic Relations, 263, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹¹¹ Case of Abigail Gelpin and John Russell, July 16, 1742, Massachusetts Archives Collection, Vol. 9 Domestic Relations, 265, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹¹² Petition of Eleanor Wells of Boston, June 28, 1740, Massachusetts Archives Collection, Vol. 9 Domestic Relations, 231, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

In her petition, Eleanor specified that they were married “on the nineteenth of September 1727 at St. Kathrine’s in London”, presented an apparently “Authentick certificate” of their marriage to the governor and council, and repeatedly described herself as George’s lawful wife. In his answer to Eleanor’s charges, George Wells, a sailmaker, testified that he and Eleanor “Cohabited together but in an Unlawful Manner...and he utterly denies that he was ever Joyned in Matrimoney with the said Eleanor for which reason he quitted her sometime ago not being willing to live with her in an Unmarried state.”¹¹³ Asserting that he had no legal ties to Eleanor, George believed he was free to leave his common law marriage with her begin a relationship with Eunice Delarance.

In some instances, laborers dissolved their common law marriages through dramatic escapes. On January 31, 1737, the Court of General Sessions of the Peace tried trader Thomas Clarke for “having had the Use and Carnal Knowledge of the Body of Susannah the wife of Joseph Browne of Dorchester.” Found guilty, Clarke was ordered to pay a fine of five pounds or “be whipped Ten Stripes at the Publick Whipping Post.”¹¹⁴ While the court records portrayed the incident as a relatively routine case of infidelity, Joseph Brown’s divorce petition to Governor Belcher told a very different story. A Dorchester tailor working in Boston, Brown stated that he had been married to Susannah since 1726 and lived with her until “about the Years 1733 and 1734 when your Petitioner

¹¹³ Answer of George Wells of Boston, Sail Maker, Massachusetts Archives Collection, Vol. 9 Domestic Relations, 236, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹¹⁴ Case of Thomas Clarke, January 31 1737, Court of General Sessions of the Peace, Massachusetts Archives Collection, Vol. 9 Domestic Relations, 221, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

observed that one Thomas Clarke had seduced her and gained her affections from him.”¹¹⁵

In May 1734, Susannah “forsooke her husband, and his habitation, possessed herself of the Most Valuable of his movable Estate and Embarked with the said Clarke in a Vessell in Order to go beyond the Seas and to Cohabit with the said Clarke.” After encountering rough seas, the ship docked at Martha’s Vineyard, where Brown seized Susannah and brought her back to his home. Despite her failed escape, Susannah “withdrew herself from him and Privately Cohabited with the said Clark more or less from that till within these two Months.” After Clarke was charged with adultery, Susannah again fled from Brown and could not be found to answer her adultery charges in court.

As dramatic as these circumstances may have been, they provide important context for the laboring community’s views on marriage and divorce. As Clare Lyons has explained in her study of colonial Philadelphia, self-divorce among laboring communities developed in response to the Anglo-American constraints on divorce.¹¹⁶ Until the mid-nineteenth century, English law only allowed divorces to members of the nobility. In Puritan Massachusetts, only the governor and his council could grant divorces.¹¹⁷ While upper and middling Bostonians employed legal and religious structures to regulate marriage and divorce, these formal restrictions led laborers to embrace extralegal methods of public separation. Like their counterparts in Philadelphia and throughout the

¹¹⁵ Petition of Joseph Brown of Dorchester in the County of Suffolk in the Province of Massachusetts, Taylor, February 16, 1737, Massachusetts Archives Collection, Vol. 9 Domestic Relations, 218, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹¹⁶ Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 16; Massachusetts General Court, *The Charters and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 608.

British Empire, Boston's laborers considered self-divorce to be the primary method of dealing with infidelity and avoided submitting petitions to the colony's governor.¹¹⁸

Anglo-American self-divorce could be accomplished through several public ceremonies including wife sale, the returning of rings and a declaration that the marriage was disbanded, and the posting of newspaper advertisements.¹¹⁹ While wife sales were far less common in Boston than in England, the town's laborers do not appear to have opposed the practice in principle. Anglo-American wife sales were typically conducted through a highly ritualized proceeding in which the husband brought his wife in a halter to the local market and conducted a public sale. After the mock auction was completed, the former husband drew up a financial agreement where the wife was formerly "sold" and handed over to her new husband.¹²⁰ Although the records of wife sales are scarce in both England and North America, a 1736 article in the *Boston Evening Post* suggests Boston's laborers occasionally used wife sales to solve marriage disputes:

The beginning of last Week a pretty odd and uncommon Adventure happened in this Town, between 2 men about a certain Woman, each one claiming her as his Wife, but so it was, that one of them had actually disposed of his Right in her to the other for *Fifteen Shillings*, this currency, who had only paid *Ten* of it in part, and refus'd to pay the other *Five*, inclining rather to quit the Woman and lose his Earnests; but Two Gentlemen happening to be present, who were Friends to Peace, charitably gave him *half a Crown* a piece, to enable to him to fulfill his Agreement, which the Creditor readily took, and gave the Women a modest Salute, wishing her well, and his Brother Sterling much Joy of his Bargain.¹²¹

As the article indicates, wife sales appears to have been an "uncommon Adventure" when it came to the dissolution of marriages among members of Boston's laboring community.

¹¹⁸ According to Lyons, laborers in colonial North America overwhelmingly favored self-divorce. In Philadelphia, laboring men placed sixty-two percent of colonial and Revolutionary self-divorce advertisements. Conversely, in her study of Massachusetts divorce records, Nancy Cott found that only twenty-nine percent of petitioners described themselves laborers, truckmen, or mariners.

¹¹⁹ Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 17.

¹²⁰ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 419.

¹²¹ *Boston Evening Post*, March 15, 1736.

As Clare Lyons has suggested in her study of Philadelphia, it is possible that North American laborers shied away from wife sales due to their striking similarity to slave auctions. If laborers did carry on with the ritual, it is likely that like the site of wife sales was shifted from the public marketplace to private homes.¹²²

More often, Boston's laboring community relied upon elopement notices in order to publicly announce the end of their marriage. Much like runaway slave advertisements, these notifications conformed to a specific formula, as seen in John Stuart's 1741 announcement placed in the *Boston Post Boy*:

Whereas *Mary*, Wife to *John Stuart* hath eloped from her Husband, and tho' requested refuses to dwell with him; These are therefore to caution all Persons against harboring, entertaining, or trusting the said *Mary* on any Account whatsoever...and he hereby declares that he will not pay any Thing for her Maintenance for the Time past, or any Debt which she may contract for her Maintenance, or otherwise for the Time to come.¹²³

Colonial wife advertisements served two purposes. First, the notices publicly declared that a couple's marriage had been dissolved through the wife's choice to elope. Secondly, they served as a notice to the community that the husband was no longer required to financially support his wife. Distinct from a true divorce granted by the governor or a bed and board divorce in which the couple remained legally married but lived separately, these advertisements served to sever all relations and obligations between the couple without legal sanction.¹²⁴

¹²² Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 409. E.P. Thompson notes that wife sales are difficult to quantify because of the question of visibility. Metropolitan newspapers often recorded wife sales conducted in the public spaces of large cities and towns, but did not report those taking place in homes or tavern. In addition, newspapers did not consistently describe wife sales to their upper and middling clientele unless they were particularly scandalous or ripe for ridicule. As a result, wife sales may have been more common in North America, but depictions of the ritual are extremely rare.

¹²³ *Boston Post-Boy*, November 23, 1741.

¹²⁴ Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 18; Nancy Cott, "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," 588.

Notably, describing the situation as an elopement was considered to be a binding declaration in the eyes of the community. In 1760, John Stickney of Newbury was forced to publicly recant his wife advertisement after she returned to his home. Stickney stated in the *Boston Evening Post* that although he had said his wife eloped, “which is commonly used on such occasions,” he “intended to signify that she went without my knowledge, the reason of which I suppose to be the behavior of some of my children; and as the matter is now accomodated, I do now declare the above mentioned advertisement to be void.”¹²⁵ Similarly, John York advertised in the *Boston Post Boy* in 1772 that his wife’s elopement had been “an absolute Falshood, and that I have again restored her to my Bed and Board.”¹²⁶

Implicit in both Stickney’s and York’s retractions was that elopements usually carried the connotation that the wife had been adulterous. In order to protect the reputation of their wives, Stickney had to specify that his wife Joanna “is a chaste woman, and did not design any thing to the contrary,” while York stated that he was “well assured of her Innocency in many things then alleged’ against her, and of her good Behavior since.” Although many husbands offered little additional information beyond what was necessary to complete the announcement, other colonial advertisements revealed the connection between elopements and infidelity. John Forrest, for instance, lamented in 1748 that his wife Elizabeth “has behaved herself very ill of late, and eloped from me, chusing rather to keep Company with other Men and utterly refuses to live with me.”¹²⁷ Similarly, laborer Joseph Woesley notified readers of the *Boston News-Letter* that

¹²⁵ *Boston Evening Post*, March 10, 1760.

¹²⁶ *Boston Post-Boy*, January 13, 1772

¹²⁷ *Boston News-Letter*, July 21, 1748.

his wife Sarah was “Cohabiting with wicked Men in the adjacent Towns.”¹²⁸ In 1742, Joseph Brown publicly aired his frustration when he posted that his wife Rachel “hath eloped (*Heaven* be prais’d) about three Weeks since from me her lawful and tender Husband, and carried off my (reputed) Child contrary to my desire and command.”¹²⁹

Through their runaway wife advertisements, Boston’s laboring community revealed a set of cultural mores concerning sex, marriage, and infidelity that were distinct from the town’s other classes. Unlike upper and middling Bostonians, Boston’s workers addressed adultery through ritualized traditions that circumvented official legal channels. Self-divorce rituals allowed workers to recognize infidelity as a common phenomenon and solve the issue without upper class intervention. Although some laborers, white and black, petitioned the governor and council for divorces, self-divorce was the preferred method of separation. This pragmatic resolution represented a fundamental gap between Boston’s laboring community and their social betters. Already divided by economic experience and other cultural norms, this split would be reinforced through riots and other crowd actions.

While common economic survival strategies, kinship networks fostered through disorderly and bawdy houses, and shared social mores concerning marriage and adultery drew the laboring population closer together, Boston’s laboring population did not constitute an egalitarian Atlantic proletariat. In *The Many-Headed Hydra*, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker argue that laborers throughout the Atlantic World

¹²⁸ *Boston News-Letter*, August 9 1770.

¹²⁹ *Boston News-Letter*, September 2, 1742. In the advertisement, Brown writes that he submitted the advertisement from Boston Harbor but that his wife Rachel was living in Dorchester. Given her residence, it is possible that the Joseph Brown writing in 1742 about his wife Mary was the same Joseph Brown whose wife Susannah was seduced by Thomas Clarke. If so, Brown would have had two wives elope within eight years.

constituted an interconnected transient population that was distinctly cooperative, genderless, and multiethnic.¹³⁰ While this formulation has been influential in our understanding of the early modern laboring population, the extent to which laborers displayed egalitarian and democratic principles appears to have been overstated with respect to Boston.

By the 1740s, Boston's African American population had risen from 400 in 1708 to approximately 1,400.¹³¹ While this figure would fluctuate in the years leading up to the American Revolution, African Americans constituted approximately ten percent of the town's population after 1740.¹³² While the vast majority of African Americans remained slaves throughout the early colonial era, Boston was also home to a small free black population that slowly increased over the course of the eighteenth century.¹³³ Although their numbers are difficult to establish based on the tendency of upper class officials to refer to all African Americans as "Negroes," Boston was also home to a small free black population that slowly increased over the course of the eighteenth century. In 1767, for instance, the town paid eight free African Americans for what appears to have been manual labor.¹³⁴ The names of Sipio Fairweather, Cesar Bowdin, and Fortune Stanford suggest that the men had previously been slaves while the names of Thomas and Joseph Humphrey hold the possibility that they had been born to a free black family. Like many other northern ports, Boston's black population was not concentrated into any one commercial sector and worked in domestic service, artisan trades, and manual labor

¹³⁰ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 332.

¹³¹ Desrochers, "Slave-for-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781," 643-644.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 644.

¹³³ The exact number of free African Americans cannot be determined, as colonial officials referred to all African Americans as "Negroes" regardless of legal status.

¹³⁴ *An Account of the Free Negroes Work*, Boston Town Records, Vol. 7, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

alongside other members of the laboring community.¹³⁵ It follows that slaves and free blacks would have worked alongside white workers in most segments of Boston's maritime economy.

Boston's loosely cohesive laboring population encompassed free and enslaved African Americans and Native Americans, but persistent racial and ethnic tensions ensured that white workers did not consider people of color equals. Slaves and free blacks were welcome in disorderly and bawdy houses, served alcohol at dram shops and taverns, and participated in laboring crowd actions and celebrations, but still ranked lower on the hierarchy. As Leslie Harris explains in description of slavery in colonial New York, spaces like taverns and "tippling houses" fostered connections between black and white workers where they could forge "common political views as well as social networks."¹³⁶ This trend towards greater interaction and association coexisted alongside attempts by white workers to distinguish themselves social and culturally from black slaves as a way of defining their independence.¹³⁷ Subsequently, Native Americans and African Americans were considered members of the laboring community, but were relegated to an inferior status by racial prejudices that had been developing and sharpening over the course of the early modern era. The extent to which people of color were welcomed as workers or ostracized depended on kinship networks, occupational categories, and personal prejudices. Like many aspects of Atlantic society, the contours and importance of racial categories within Boston's laboring population remained fluid for much of the early colonial era. White workers could envision laboring people of color

¹³⁵ Desrochers, "Slave-for-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781," 632.

¹³⁶ Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery*, 43.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

as members of their community while simultaneously believing they were racially distinct or inferior.

This ambiguity resulted in contradictory perceptions of race that could exist simultaneously within the urban environment. White women could welcome people of color into their disorderly houses while wet nurses could at the same time publicly refuse to nurse black children. White men could serve alongside free blacks as mariners on the same vessels on one day and commit brutal acts of violence against them on another. In 1744, for instance, four caulkers were found guilty of “an assault upon the Body of Prince, a Negro of the Reverend Mr. Addington [Newspost] with force as aforesaid did wound, beat, bruise, and smite the said Negro so as to put him in danger.”¹³⁸ Even more shocking were the events of July 1747. On July 27th, Josiah Newall, Percival Farmer, William Farmer, and David Leavit appeared before the Court of General Sessions as ringleaders of a crowd action that had occurred on July 1. Newall and Percival Farmer were described as coopers, while William Farmer and David Leavit were listed as a shipwright and mariner, respectively. According to the court, the four men assembled a mob of “Forty or upward” and organized an attack on random members of Boston’s African American community:

The said Josiah, Percival, William, and David with others to the Jurors unknown with force as aforesaid did then and there unlawfully and routously abuse, beat, and evil intreat Divers Negroe men to the Jurors unknown but Subjects of our Lord the King that now is, threaten them and greatly endanger their lives and limbs picking them off the ways or Causeway leading to Charlestown Ferry into the water there and the said Jurors further present that the said Josiah, Percival, William, and David, and others unknown did with force as aforesaid unlawfully affright, terrifie, and threaten one John Harris of S. Boston, Boatbuilder, put him into great terrors and fear of his life, and other enormities they the said Josiah,

¹³⁸ At an Adjournment of a Court of General Sessions of the Peace held at Boston last Monday the 30th day of July AD 1744, Suffolk County Court of General Sessions of the Peace Record Book, January 1, 1738 to December 31, 1780, Suffolk County Court Records, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

Percival, William, and David did then and there effect and perpetuate contrary to Law.¹³⁹

Based on the description provided by the prosecution, it seems likely that this attack on Boston's African American population was planned in advance. While it is unclear why the mob targeted African Americans in this manner, it is possible that the rioters were lashing out against British recruitment practices during the War of Austrian Succession. Whereas military recruiters and impressments disproportionately targeted white laborers, African Americans and Native Americans were banned, and therefore exempt, from service.¹⁴⁰ White laborers may have attacked African Americans under the perception that those whom they considered racially inferior had received a social benefit. The association between race and military service is notable because only four months later, black and white mariners would riot together against British impressment in the Knowles Riot. In early colonial Boston, the working population could be cultural and socially coherent while still divided along racial lines. Boston's motley crew was cooperative and multiethnic, but it was not egalitarian.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, common economic experiences, social proximity, and cultural mores drew Boston's laboring population into a loosely cohesive community. Strengthened by personal kinship and neighborhood connections, Boston's laboring population drew together into an identifiable group that spanned various occupations, religions, and occasionally, races. Described as the lower sort by the town's upper classes, Boston's workers were seen as a distinct part of the commonwealth that practiced plebeian traditions that were in desperate need of reform and regulation.

¹³⁹ At an Adjournment of a Court of General Sessions of the Peace held at Boston 27th Day of July AD 1747, Suffolk County Court of General Sessions of the Peace Record Book, January 1, 1738 to December 31, 1780, Suffolk County Court Records, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁴⁰ *Boston Post-Boy*, July 21, 1746.

Although racial divisions and theories of white supremacy kept the laboring community from forming an egalitarian proletariat, the overall population grew closer together over the first half of the eighteenth century. As the boundaries separating plebeian and patrician grew sharper, the two groups began to develop separate views on the common good. Employing crowd actions as an agent of social change, Boston's laborers would begin policing the behavior of the middling and upper class neighbors as they sought to influence what Bostonians would consider the common good.

* * *

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, the cultural and economic commonalities shared by Boston's laborers set them apart from middling and upper class Bostonians and rendered them a distinct group within the greater Boston population. As Gary Nash explains, Boston's laboring community did not consciously espouse the class and economic concerns seen among industrial workers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁴¹ The wide range of occupational categories, economic prospects, personal relationships ensured that eighteenth century laborers would not advocate for specific reforms like their antebellum descendants. Instead, as conditions continued to deteriorate within the town, Boston's laborers joined together to challenge signs of political and economic inequality and defend their overlapping interests in what appeared to be an increasingly unfair and unequal environment.

As Boston's laborers grew closer together in the first half of the eighteenth century and forged their own economic and cultural ideology, they began to challenge the town's upper class leadership due to the emergence of two separate interpretations of corporate communalism. The first, advanced by Boston's laboring community, advocated

¹⁴¹ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, xiii.

more traditional economic and personal relationships that emphasized the common good of the entire community. Similar to what Boston's upper classes had sought in the seventeenth century, this view allowed Bostonians to challenge the town's leaders as long as they were acting in the community's best interests. While these interests could be contested, this vision of corporate communalism allowed a space outside of the social structure where the laboring community could help guide the town's future.

This vision of corporate communalism aligned with an early colonial ideology that Gary Nash describes as “radical Evangelicalism.” According to Nash, radical Evangelicals consisted of “the lower elements in the urban social hierarchy—laborers, merchant seamen, and artisans in the least remunerative trades such as shoemakers, tailors, coopers, ship caulkers, and stocking weavers.” Corresponding to the laboring community in Boston and other northern ports, the ideology grew out of the economic, social, and cultural experiences of the early eighteenth century. In Nash's explanation, early colonial laborers “had limited aspirations, and clung to the traditional idea of a moral economy in which the fair wage and just price rather than free competition and the laws of supply and demand ruled. Family, pride in workmanship, religion, and community counted for more than capital accumulation.”¹⁴² After struggling under economic hardship and social regulation, Boston's laborers came to espouse this ideology and demanded that a moral economy form the basis of corporate communalism.

In contrast to this, the town's merchants, political officials, and other members of the upper classes proposed a new type of corporate communalism that directly incorporated both the British social hierarchy and emergent upper class economic individualism. Boston's leaders continued to tolerate crowd actions and public protests,

¹⁴² Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 220.

but they did so with the understanding that these activities should not hinder or overturn their decisions or their individual interests. As merchants like Elisha Cooke, Nathaniel Oliver, and Andrew Belcher gained greater influence over local politics at the turn of the eighteenth century, officials and their upper class allies increasingly placed their own commercial interests over those of the general population.¹⁴³ As a result of Queen Anne's War, Boston's upper class merchants had gained substantial political and economic power by consolidating the ownership of ships and real estate into fewer and wealthier hands.¹⁴⁴ Merchants attempted to build upon the financial gains made during wartime to expand their profits by tying the town more closely to the booms and busts of the Atlantic economy. By the 1710s, many of Boston's merchants had used their status to obtain special land rights and privileges that further secured their control over the town's political and economic affairs.¹⁴⁵ As it became apparent that Boston's upper classes would use their wealth and influence to improve their standing even if it meant overall economic decline, these divergent views of corporate communalism would come into direct conflict.

Occurring concurrently and contributing to the emergence of social and cultural bonds within the laboring community, Boston's corporate communalism ruptured through three moments of violent outbreaks: the riots of Queen Anne's War, the market riots of 1737, and the Knowles Riot of 1747. As laborers came to occupy their own separate cultural and economic space, they used riots to assert their vision of corporate communalism and their ideology of radical Evangelicalism. These demonstrations reinforced and influenced the economic and cultural outlook developing within the

¹⁴³ Warden, *Boston: 1689-1776*, 51.

¹⁴⁴ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 35-38.

¹⁴⁵ Warden, *Boston: 1689-1776*, 68.

laboring community and came in direct response to Boston merchants asserting their political and economic power. First, merchant policies undertaken during Queen Anne's War triggered two major riots in 1710 and 1711. During the war, Boston experienced food shortages as military provisioning and limited imports raised grain prices and placed a heavy burden on the town's laboring poor. This situation was exacerbated when Andrew Belcher, a prominent merchant and commissary general during the war, began stockpiling grain to fulfill a contract for a military expedition.¹⁴⁶ As a merchant, Belcher purchased the wheat that was available from Boston's rural hinterland and proceeded to sell it to the acting commissary general: himself. Not only did this dramatically drive up the price of wheat, but Belcher proceeded to ship what grain remained to other colonies for additional profits.

In response to Belcher's unfair economic practices and the economic hardship they imposed on the laboring community, Boston's workers rioted under the traditional auspices of corporate communalism. On April 30, 1710, a mob boarded one of Belcher's ships and cut the rudder. According to Samuel Sewall, the male rioters acted because of "Captain Belchar's sending of her away Laden with Wheat in this time when Wheat is so dear."¹⁴⁷ Notably, when Belcher sought to press charges against the rioters in May, a Mr. Cumby, the foreman on the grand jury, asserted that the ship's own crew assisted the crowd in disabling the vessel. While this claim was immediately objected to by Belcher's

¹⁴⁶ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 46.

¹⁴⁷ Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729, Newly Edited from the Manuscripts at the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Volume II: 1709-1729, ed. M. Halsey Thomas (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 637.

attorney, it suggests that the seamen working for Belcher felt more loyalty for their fellow workers than their employer.¹⁴⁸

The hardship imposed on Boston's laboring community by Queen Anne's War carried over into the next year. Recruiting for colonial militias and regiments drew heavily on the laboring population of Boston and Massachusetts and by the end of the war in 1713, one quarter of those who had served from Massachusetts had been killed.¹⁴⁹ As Gary Nash explains, this loss of able-bodied laboring men drove widows and their children onto Boston's alms rolls and created an increased demand for public and private charity.¹⁵⁰ With war already taxing the lives of Boston's workers in 1711, an October fire destroyed "an old Tenement within a back Yard in *Cornhill*" and several other buildings, an accident that the *Boston News-letter* blamed on the "carelessness of a poor Scottish Woman."¹⁵¹ Frustrated by the apathy displayed by Boston officials for their economic suffering, laborers once again rioted. Targeting Boston's more wealthy inhabitants, the rioters, likely white men due to the lack of specific description provided by contemporary reports, stole rings, a necklace, and gold and silver from a goldsmith and several household items from lawyer Edward Weaver.¹⁵²

In both instances, laborers sought to rectify violations of the social order and alleviate the hardship felt by their community. By rioting in 1710 and 1711, workers regulated Belcher's behavior and drew attention to the unfair burden inflicted upon them by Queen Anne's War. Although the mobs were small, usually only around fifty men,

¹⁴⁸ Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 637.

¹⁴⁹ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 35.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵¹ *Boston News-Letter*, October 8 1711.

¹⁵² Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 29; *Boston News-Letter*, November 26, 1711. Contemporary observers usually noted the presence of African Americans in colonial mobs, usually as a way to associate the mob with the "lower sort." Women were also described, as it was uncommon for women to participate directly in crowd actions.

their actions served to challenge patrician rule at the behest of the larger body of aggrieved workers.¹⁵³ These crowd actions reflect a growing sense of community within Boston's laboring population and an understanding that Boston's upper class merchants were content to profit while laboring families struggled to find ways to support themselves. Rather than acknowledging the rioters had been motivated by unfair economic practices or corporate communalism, however, officials sought to punish the laborers for violating the social hierarchy. Boston's selectmen issued a resolution in 1711 seeking to punish anyone who had taken "advantage of such confusion and calamities to rob, plunder, embezzle, convey away and conceal the goods and effects of their distressed neighbors."¹⁵⁴ Not only was the poor Scottish woman blamed for her carelessness, but Samuel Sewall claimed she had been drunk as well. In regard to the 1710 food riots, Ebenezer Pemberton, then the minister of Old South Church, stated that the rioters were "not god's people but the Devil's people that wanted Corn. There was Corn to be had; if they had not impoverished themselves by Rum, they might buy Corn."¹⁵⁵ Although both riots reflected the traditional understanding of corporate communalism, the diverging interpretations of the concept led political and moral leaders to ignore workers' complaints in the pursuit of public order.

In the 1730s, the town's public markets triggered the second violent outbreak and caused a dispute over the contours of corporate communalism. As a nexus of regional and Atlantic commerce, Boston's streets and public squares hosted a chaotic mix of vendors, merchants, and farmers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unlike other colonial ports, Boston neither operated a regulated market nor designated a particular

¹⁵³ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 46.

¹⁵⁴ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 29.

¹⁵⁵ Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 638.

market day.¹⁵⁶ Instead, Boston traders and rural farmers regulated themselves and sold their goods without established locations or set prices. This “open market system” favored Boston’s laboring community, as it allowed laborers to seek out traders with lower prices, discouraged monopolies, and encouraged competition between vendors to prevent artificially inflated prices.¹⁵⁷

Boston officials and wealthy merchants first attempted to establish a regulated public market in 1697. Despite public endorsements from prominent members of the community and a series of pamphlets touting the benefits of market oversight in the early 1700s, several different plans failed when brought before the town meeting.¹⁵⁸ In 1733, Boston officials once again presented proposals calling for three strictly regulated markets “in the Vacant place at Or near the Town Dock, at the Open Space before and about the old north meeting House, and One at or near the Great Tree at the South end Near Mr. Eliots House.”¹⁵⁹ As this proposal was being drafted, the *Boston Gazette* printed a lengthy editorial that asked Bostonians to support the new plan.¹⁶⁰ Among other assertions, the piece argued that public markets would improve the morals of the town’s workers, as “much idleness would be prevented with us; the Mornings work in our Families would go on; our servants would not be spoilt as now they are, nor our families distracted as they often are by their sloth and falsehood, And so abundance of evil would be prevented.”¹⁶¹ Describing workers as a population in need of supervision, the *Boston*

¹⁵⁶ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 30.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵⁸ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 31; *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Records from 1700 to 1728* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1883), 129.

¹⁵⁹ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Records from 1729 to 1742* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1885), 40.

¹⁶⁰ *Boston Gazette*, February 19, 1733; *Boston Gazette*, February 26, 1733.

¹⁶¹ *Boston Gazette*, February 19, 1733.

Gazette asserted that the public markets would help control the increasingly distinct laboring community.

The editorial also addressed a major fear held by the laboring community that regulated markets would lead to higher prices. Opponents of the plan contended that if all trade were forced to occur at the three public markets, the limited space would reduce the amount of goods available, drive up demand, and limit the buying power of the laboring poor. The *Gazette* sought to allay these fears by claiming that the markets would stop “the Oppression we are all under, and especially the poor, by the *Hucksters* for stalling, engrossing, and buying up the Provisions that come into Town; which *they* buy at any rate, and then raise the price again as they please.”¹⁶² After declaring that regulated markets would prevent artificially inflated prices, however, the *Gazette* admitted that prices would likely increase. Rather than acknowledging this possibility and suggesting ways in which officials might prevent rising prices, the *Gazette* attacked workers for their “vicious Extravagancy and Enormity” and informed the laboring community that they should be content with less:

They that are poorer in worldly state should and must give way to the Rich. Who but they ordinarily should buy the dearest and best of the kind? *Providence* means it for them. It is the Government of *Heaven*; let us submit to it. GOD has given into their hands more abundantly. *Let not thine Eye be evil*. Now and then we that are poorer may taste of the best too and be thankful. But we should be willing to live low, where GOD has set us and having *food* and *raiment* (tho’ not so much of it as some, nor of so fine a sort) *let us be therewith content*.¹⁶³

In their defense of the public markets, the *Boston Gazette* relied upon a vision of the Puritan Ethic that stressed conformity with hierarchical status. Dismissing the opposition of the laboring community, the *Gazette* placed the interests of upper class merchants and

¹⁶² *Boston Gazette*, February 19, 1733.

¹⁶³ *Boston Gazette*, February 26, 1733.

colonial officials over the needs of the entire community. Although the *Gazette* believed that the regulated markets would benefit the upper classes, “together with the *poorest*,” the needs of the laboring community would be ignored in pursuit of economic progress.

When the plan finally came before the town meeting for a vote, Bostonians narrowly approved the markets 364 to 339.¹⁶⁴ In the subsequent years, the transition to regulated markets coincided with outbreaks of disease and economic recession. Only two years later, Boston’s selectmen formally petitioned Governor Belcher to abate the town’s taxes due to “the deplorable Estate of said Town.”¹⁶⁵ The selectmen noted that “Our Trades-men of all denominations (Except the Shipbuilders, and that only this present year) having very little Employment, and yet very heavily Taxed and are under the utmost discouragements, the want of Money without which no Country can possibly subsist, is so scarce and hardly to be Obtain’d, that there is not One half sufficient to carry on the Trade of the Province.”¹⁶⁶

On March 24, 1737, white laborers and tradesmen vented their frustrations against the declining economic fortunes of the New England port. As previously described, “the middle Market-House in this Town, together with several Butcher’s Shops near the same, were cut, pull’d down, and entirely demolished, by a Number of Persons unknown; and several Posts of the North-Market House were also sawn asunder the same Night.” In his denunciation of the riot on March 25, Lieutenant Governor Spencer Phips specified that the rioters were “a great Number of rude and disorderly Persons (many of them being

¹⁶⁴ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Boston Records from 1729 to 1742*, 46.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

painted or otherwise disguised)” and promised one hundred pounds to anyone who “shall discover and inform against any of the Ring-Leaders of the said Riot.”¹⁶⁷

Surprisingly, the impetus for the 1737 market riots appears not to have been the public markets themselves, but the butcher shops mentioned by the *Boston News-Letter*.¹⁶⁸ Just as the 1733 opposition to the public markets had predicted, food prices increased in the years after the markets’ approval. According to the *Boston Evening Post*, the price of meat had risen dramatically by 1737, “not because there is a Scarcity...but, as we are informed by the management of the Drovers and Butchers who, (’tis affirmed) have agreed to keep up the Price of Beef at Twelve Pence per Pound.”¹⁶⁹ Instead of banning "hucksters" from artificially inflating prices, the public markets allowed butchers to organize and manipulate the Boston economy.

Rather than empathizing with the laboring poor, the butchers paraded several cattle through the street “preceded by a Smug fellow playing on the Bag Pipes with a very lively Air.” The *Boston Evening Post* found the parade to be “an Insult upon the Town in our present distressing Circumstances” but with no other commercial options, the town’s “Buyers must at last pay the Piper.”¹⁷⁰ The regulated public market system allowed the town’s butchers to embrace economic individualism at the expense of the laboring community. In demolishing the butcher shops and the public markets, the rioters sought to punish the butchers for their monopoly, demolish the physical symbols of the regulated market structure, and call attention to the economic pressure felt by the laboring community.

¹⁶⁷ *Boston News-Letter*, April 1, 1737.

¹⁶⁸ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 35.

¹⁶⁹ *Boston Evening Post*, March 21, 1737.

¹⁷⁰ *Boston Evening Post*, March 27, 1737. Tager quotes the *Post* as stating “the Drovers must at last pay the Piper,” but the *Post* appears to have written “Buyers” and placed the burden on those already suffering.

In addition, the laborers very likely conceived of the assault on the markets and butcher stalls as a form of rough music. Also known as skimmington or charivari, rough music rituals were common traditions practiced among laborers throughout Europe in the medieval and early modern eras. As Dale Cockrell explains, in rough music rituals, “young adult, generally unmarried males take upon themselves the well-being of the community and mark out those adjudged to be undermining the social cohesion of the community.” These groups, usually disguised in some way, devised of moments of “short-term destruction of the domestic peace to ensure long-term communal security. Attendant shame—the noise would alert the whole community—was meant to encourage future proper behavior.”¹⁷¹ Boston’s laboring community embraced the Anglo-American ritual as part of their plebeian cultural traditions and used rough music in riots throughout the eighteenth century. In the market riots, white tradesmen and other laborers disguised themselves and retaliated against the butchers for their brazen display of unjust economic behavior. In keeping with rough music, however, the laborers did so as a service to the greater laboring community, performed the action using plebeian cultural mores, and did not commit violence against the butchers themselves. In this way, they upheld one of the central tenets of rough music: using public ritual to displace actual violence. The rioters resorted to public disorder, but ultimately did so in an orderly, restrained manner.¹⁷²

In the succeeding weeks, tensions within the town remained high. On April 5, the Boston town meeting seemed ready to acknowledge the rioters’ concerns and return to the open market system. But rather than immediately rebuilding the markets, the town approved a petition to appropriate the public markets for another purpose. As the middle

¹⁷¹ Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 33.

¹⁷² Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 486.

market had been completely destroyed by the mob, the committee assigned to the petition concluded that both the North and South markets could be converted into space for shops or demolished so that the land could be used “as the Town Shall think fit.”¹⁷³

In the meantime, the laboring community began to respond angrily to the rumor that Governor Belcher would raise the rural militias to prevent further unrest. On March 26, Edward Winslow, the Suffolk County Sheriff, received an anonymous letter from a presumed leader of the rioters. After arguing that in their conception of corporate communalism, the mob “had no Design to do the Town any Damage, but a great deal of good,” the author demonstrated the lengths the rioters would go to defend their community:

... We have above Five Hundred Men in solemn League and Covenant to stand by one another, and can procure above Seven Hundred more of the same Mind; so that it will not signify any Thing for you with Three or Four Companies of Men in Arms to suppress us, provided we had any Thing further to do, we would do it, provided you loaded your Guns with Powder and Ball; for by the God that made you, if you come to that, we will find as much Powder and Ball as you can; so that we will go to a greater Length than Clubs and Staffs... so that Governour *Belcher* himself may pretend to do what he will, there must be a great deal of Blood shed before we will be suppressed, provided you take any Advantage of us or any of us.¹⁷⁴

A broadside posted on the door of the public meetinghouse on March 27 mirrored these images of violence and armed revolt. In response to the belief that the militia would be brought against them, the broadside boasted that “we will show you a Hundred Men where you can show One.” In addition, the rioters asserted that although both they and the colonial authorities were “all Royal Blood,” they were willing to attack their fellow

¹⁷³ At a meeting of the Freeholders and other inhabitants of Boston, duly Qualified and lawfully warned, Assembled in Public Town Meeting, On Tuesday, April 5, 1737, Boston Town Papers, 1737, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁷⁴ *Boston News-Letter*, April 21, 1737.

Englishmen, “make a Bloody Ending, and so breed a Civil War” if the authorities took further action against them.¹⁷⁵

Finally, Sheriff Winslow received a second letter on April 8 that reinforced the public outrage against colonial officials. Not only did the letter directly address the possibility of fighting the colonial militia, but it laid bare how severe the opposition towards public markets had become:

Whereas it is Reported about Town that the Governour designs to bring the Country People into this Place as a Guard upon it, as also has given out many other Threats against the People; as also that some have given out that some private Persons design to set up a private Market of their own; as also many other Threats which are not consistent with English Men; This is therefore to let you know, That there is a great number in the Town have combined together, that if any or all of the above be put in Execution, there must and will be Murder committed, if not upon the Governour himself; for they are very Resolute and desperate; Therefore as a Friend to my Native Country, I send you this, not doubting but you will make good Use of it; it being of more Consequence than may be tho't of at present.¹⁷⁶

Unlike the first two messages, this final letter appears to have been submitted by a member of the laboring community who was not directly tied to the market rioters. Identifying himself simply as a “native” Bostonian, the author expanded upon the information contained within two previous messages but included an important distinction. Rather than suggesting that the colonial militia would be met by an organized, armed defense, the author warned the sheriff that members of the community would attempt to murder Governor Belcher.

This development was a significant departure from the traditional standards of colonial crowd actions. Typically, colonial American riots targeted property and avoided

¹⁷⁵ *Boston News-Letter*, April 21, 1737.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

violence against individuals.¹⁷⁷ As demonstrated by the food riots during Queen Anne's War and the 1737 market riot, members of the mob destroyed ships, homes, and shops but left those who owned them unharmed. This pattern was replicated throughout colonial North America, as the intent of riots was to demolish the symbols or the equipment used by an offender in order to register their opposition without bloodshed.¹⁷⁸

In recognition of this discipline and the understanding that many crowd actions were initiated as an element of corporate communalism, colonial officials restrained from violence as well. Colonial officials resisted the temptation to use militias to stop riots not only because of the potential for widespread clashes, but because the need to do so would be seen as a breakdown of deference and hierarchical authority. Instead, officials often personally addressed crowds in order to demonstrate their control over the situation and limit the damage that could be committed.¹⁷⁹

By threatening to call out the rural militias, Massachusetts officials violated the traditional tenets of corporate communalism and sought to impose strict hierarchical order. While the depictions of the market riot do not specify the number of individuals who originally participated, it is highly probable that only a fraction of the twelve hundred men mentioned in the letters helped demolish the markets. Instead, this number likely grew in response to the Governor's actions. The distinction made between the "Five Hundred Men in solemn League and Covenant" and the "Seven Hundred more of the same Mind" points to a growing degree of solidarity within Boston's laboring community. Whereas laborers often sought to distance themselves from riots to avoid being identified and punished, workers after the market riot readily offered to assist in the

¹⁷⁷ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 23.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

fight against colonial officials. As a result of their common economic experience, personal kinship networks, and cultural norms, Boston's workers rallied around the rioters and demonstrated their willingness to defend their community's interests.

Even though Boston's laborers would have universally experienced the burden of higher food prices, the grievances against the public markets were not shared by the upper classes. After Governor Belcher threatened to suppress the rioters with rural militias, however, the discourse surrounding the riot shifted from the public markets to the tradition of colonial crowd actions. If the militia was allowed to violently suppress the rioters and patrol the streets of Boston, the traditional protections granted to laborers engaged in crowd actions would have been revoked. In the process, the upper class vision for corporate communalism that stressed hierarchical authority and economic individualism would have prevailed. Faced with these possibilities, Boston's laboring community threatened both civil war and murder to defend their rights of assembly and protest.

In his response to these letters and the general outrage within the laboring community, Governor Belcher reasserted his opposition to the rioters but also attempted to strike a conciliatory tone. Belcher first attacked the letters and broadsides for inspiring "a factious and discontented Spirit" among the laboring community, whom he described as "those Persons who are so weakened and inconsiderate as to receive Impressions therefrom."¹⁸⁰ After condemning the violent notices, however, Belcher attempted to appeal to corporate communalism and shared British identity. Belcher claimed that the overt hostility represented by the broadside and letters misrepresented "His Majesty's good Subjects of this Province as seditious and generally disposed to cast off His

¹⁸⁰ *Boston Gazette*, April 18, 1737.

Majesty's lawful Government over them (contrary to the known and approved Loyalty of this People)." Belcher argued that for any true Bostonian, the heated rhetoric "must needs raise a just Abhorrence and Indignation in the Minds of all such Persons as have the least Love for their Country and Concern for the Interest and Reputation thereof."¹⁸¹ With the lessons of King Philip's War still in minds and memory of Boston's inhabitants, the rhetoric was designed to remind laborers that hierarchy and shared values protected the town from internal and external threats. Stressing deference to authority within his understanding of corporate communalism, Belcher hoped to restore peace to the Boston community under his lawful governance.

Belcher's endorsement of the upper class version of corporate communalism was followed by a carefully worded reiteration of Lieutenant Governor Phips's bounty offer. Belcher stated that his inquiry into the riots would include "Justices of the Peace, Sheriffs, Under Sheriffs, Constables, and other Officers." As similar requests for information throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not specifically list who would be involved in the investigation, Belcher likely listed them in order to ensure that no soldiers or militia members would be brought into Boston. In addition, Belcher offered "all necessary Protection and Encouragement of the Government herein" to anyone who would provide information concerning the leaders of the riot and a pardon to those involved in disseminating (but not writing) the letters and broadside.¹⁸² By framing the ongoing actions taken by the colonial and local governments in this way, Belcher abandoned his plans for armed suppression and adjusted his plans to conform with the traditional response to crowd actions.

¹⁸¹ *Boston News-Letter*, April 21, 1737.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

The market riot of 1737 and its aftermath marked a fundamental shift in Boston's social order. Increasingly marginalized by policies that stressed individualism and favored upper class merchants, workers attacked symbols of the new economic system in an attempt to restore their vision of corporate community. By demolishing the butcher stalls and markets and threatening to murder the colonial governor, laborers sought to restore the economic system enshrined in the ideology of radical Evangelicalism. Although the laboring community and colonial officials both appealed to a common British identity after the riot, the rhetoric only served to end the standoff and did not bring the two groups together. Belcher's words echoed the call for corporate cohesion coming out of King Philip's War, but town politics and the needs of workers had changed substantially since the 1670s. Boston's laborers now focused their fears on rising food prices, the gradual erosion of economic stability, and the decline of their community. Dismissive of these concerns, Boston's merchants would sponsor the creation of another public market only three years later.¹⁸³ As a result of the market riot, corporate communalism had weakened to the point that it could no longer subdue the town's growing social divisions.

The extent to which Boston's corporate community had unraveled became clear in the subsequent years. Beginning in 1739, Boston became involved in two major world conflicts: the War of Jenkins' Ear and the War of Austrian Succession. Although the War of Austrian Succession grew to encompass most of Europe, the North American theaters saw Great Britain once again engaging in wars against Spain and France.

¹⁸³ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Boston Records from 1729 to 1742*, 260.

While war provided a boon to workers employed in Boston's shipbuilding trade, tripling the number of ships under construction in 1741, it also brought costly military expeditions. Between 1739, and 1744, approximately six hundred Bostonians fought against the Spanish in the Caribbean and South America.¹⁸⁴ This figure increased as the conflict with Spain expanded into the War of Austrian Succession and French Canada entered the fray. By 1745, the population of laboring men willing to fight was largely depleted and colonial officials forced to offer mariners double the usual pay to participate in an attack on Louisbourg.¹⁸⁵

As the war continued, the British Navy increasingly turned to impressment as a method of acquiring seamen for their warships. During Queen Anne's War, British captains had repeatedly violated impressment regulations, which upset colonial merchants and eventually led to the "Sixth of Anne" Act of 1708.¹⁸⁶ The law completely prohibited the impressment of colonial sailors but was challenged by British officers, who insisted that the act was nullified by the end of Queen Anne's War. In its place, the British Navy asserted that that colonial sailors could be impressed as long as royal governors issued press warrants.¹⁸⁷ Although the British Admiralty began operating under this interpretation after 1723, the "Sixth of Anne" Act was never formally repealed and remained law until 1775.¹⁸⁸

For Bostonians, impressment was seen as detrimental to the entire community but especially damaging to laborers. After the town had outgrown its ability to sustain itself in the mid-seventeenth century, Boston became reliant upon coastal trade to provide it

¹⁸⁴ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 104.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁸⁶ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 55.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

with food.¹⁸⁹ While press gangs could and often did patrol Boston's streets in search of viable candidates, warships could only seize sailors on vessels entering port. The targeting of incoming ships during times of war discouraged coastal trade into Boston, caused shortages in needed goods, and depressed Boston's maritime economy. In 1742, for instance, the Massachusetts General Court argued that impressments caused Bostonians to suffer after Captain James Scott began impressing sailors without the governor's permission. Governor William Shirley charged Scott with placing "the Inhabitants of this place in...a great terror" and threatening the safety of the town by interrupting the coastal trade, "upon which the inhabitants of the town depend for their constant supplies for the support of life."¹⁹⁰

Despite repeated protests by colonial officials, British ships continued to impress Boston's mariners and sailors for service in the War of Austrian Succession. Although Boston by this time was a less active and prosperous port than New York or Philadelphia, its proximity to both Europe and French Canada ensured that its laboring community would be disproportionately targeted by press gangs. In November 1745, the captain of the HMS *Wager* requested a press warrant from Lieutenant Governor Phips. While Phips granted the warrant, he stipulated that the press gang be made up of "a Number of Discreet Men Inhabitants of this Province and NO others" and that none of the men impressed be veterans of the Louisbourg expedition.¹⁹¹ Despite these requirements, the press gang, made up exclusively of officers and sailors from the HMS *Wager*, seized several sailors who had just returned from the Louisbourg. When three veteran sailors

¹⁸⁹ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 27.

¹⁹⁰ William Pencak, *Contested Commonwealths: Essays in American History* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2011), 13.

¹⁹¹ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 62.

from the coastal sloop *Resolution* resisted being pressed into service, the press gang attacked and killed two of them.¹⁹² The captain of the *Resolution* was able to arrest two members of the press gang, but before colonial officials could mount a formal response, the remaining members returned to the HMS *Wager* and sailed away.

While Boston's laboring community had resisted impressment in the past, the events of 1745 were the first instance in which these efforts had ended in bloodshed.¹⁹³ As a result, the deaths caused by the HMS *Wager's* press gang stood out as an especially heinous violation of the law. In response to the incident, Boston's town meeting reiterated that impressments were "Breaches of Magna Charta" and argued that the authorized warrants violated their "Rights and priviledges."¹⁹⁴ Weary of the officially sanctioned attacks on themselves and their neighbors, Boston's workers viewed impressment as an assault on their personal and communal freedoms and felt that colonial authorities were unwilling to defend the laboring community.

In the winter of 1747, the simmering anger held by Boston's laboring community against press gangs triggered the third violent outbreak. On the night of November 16, Commodore Charles Knowles sent a press gang into Boston in pursuit of five mariners who had deserted from his ship. Had Knowles restricted his search to the deserters, he would have been within his rights as elucidated in the "Sixth of Anne" law. Instead, Knowles's press gang swept the town's laboring neighborhoods returned to the HMS *Achilles* with forty-six men, including "some ship carpenters apprentices and laboring

¹⁹² Tager, *Boston Riots*, 62.

¹⁹³ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 58. In June 1741, a crowd of "looser People...with clubs and Sticks in their hands" prevented a press gang from the HMS *Astrea* from carrying out their impressments. The next day, a mob of approximately three hundred people surrounded the house where the captain of the HMS *Astrea* was lodging and threatened to kill him if another attempt was made.

¹⁹⁴ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, containing the Boston Town Records, 1742 to 1757* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1885), 85.

land men.”¹⁹⁵ In retaliation, a mob of approximately three hundred seamen captured several British naval officers and held them hostage in an attempt to free the wrongfully impressed men.¹⁹⁶

The next morning, a mob assembled outside of Governor William Shirley’s home and accosted him for issuing an unreasonable and “unjustifiable” impressment warrant.¹⁹⁷ Shirley addressed the crowd and informed them that Knowles’s actions had been undertaken without his permission. Armed with the knowledge that the press gang had been illegal, the mob began to seek symbols of British authority upon which to vent their anger. By this time, the crowd had swollen from the original three hundred to “several thousand people.”¹⁹⁸ As the day went on, laborers likely joined the mob as news of the riot spread through personal kinship networks and word of mouth. According to several witnesses, a substantial cross-section of Boston’s laboring population had joined with the mariners in the mob, including “idle Fellows of low circumstances, and lower Character,” and “boys and negroes.”¹⁹⁹ As in 1737, the original core of rioters grew considerably as the laboring community, including white tradesmen, slaves and free blacks, and likely some women, joined in support of their brethren.

In the Knowles Riot, however, the crowd continued to grow as the mob came to include a sizable portion of Boston’s entire population. This sudden turnout in defense of the town’s mariners marked the first demonstration in which laborers spurred public protest against imperial policy. Rather than receiving orders or guidance from

¹⁹⁵ Pencak, *Contested Commonwealths*, 20.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹⁸ Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts of Massachusetts Bay, From the Charter of King William and Queen Mary, in 1691, until the Year 1750*, Vol. II, The Second Edition (London: J. Smith, 1768), 431.

¹⁹⁹ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 67; Pencak, *Contested Commonwealths*, 23.

oppositional leaders, the mariners initiated rioting and gained support from middling and upper class Bostonians over the course of the day. The town as a whole had agreed that impressment was harmful to workers and the town's economy, but workers pushed the town into action. Although middling Patriots would recognize the power of the mob in the imperial crisis and the American Revolution, the Knowles Riot stood out as the first moment in which workers initiated a cross-class crowd action.

In the late afternoon, the massive mob approached the Boston Town House, home of the Massachusetts General Court, and entered the building after "throwing Stones and Brickbatts in at the Windows, and having broke all the Windows of the lower floor."²⁰⁰ Following a failed attempt by the mob to enter the upstairs Council Chamber, Governor Shirley began negotiating with the mob in an attempt to end the action. During the discussion, a leader of the mob asked why the two arrested members of the 1745 press gang had not been executed and reminded Shirley of a Scottish riot in 1736 where laborers lynched a military official in order to obtain justice outside the legal system.²⁰¹ The mob used the anecdote to notify Shirley that, like their predecessors threatened in 1737, they would violate traditional rules governing crowd actions and resort to murder if the impressed men were not released. After it became clear that Shirley was unwilling to support the rioters and work in their best interests, the mob dispersed and began targeting people and property related to Knowles and Shirley.

First, the mob seized a barge, believed to have been used by Commodore Knowles, and brought it to Governor Shirley's home with the intention of setting it aflame. According to Thomas Hutchinson, the mob moved the barge to Boston Common

²⁰⁰ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 68.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 69. The two press gang members had been found guilty but the King had stayed their execution.

and burned it there “from consideration of the danger of setting the town on fire.”²⁰² After the fire, the mob broke into smaller groups and searched the town for naval officers that they could use as hostages. With bands of rioters breaking into the naval hospital and several affluent homes in the course of the night, Governor Shirley resorted to his final available option and summoned the colonial militia.²⁰³

To Shirley’s dismay, the colonial militia failed to appear. As William Pencak notes, it is likely that it did not show up because militia members were actively engaged in the rioting.²⁰⁴ By 1747, common values and economic circumstances within the laboring community had led militia members to ignore the orders of their superiors and join with their neighbors in rioting. With no militia to command, Shirley fled to Castle William in Boston Harbor and wrote Commodore Knowles requesting that he release the impressed men and accede to the mob’s demands.

Rather than backing down, Knowles denied Shirley’s request and instead prepared to barrage the city with cannon fire. According to Joseph Ballard, a local carpenter conducting repairs on Knowles’s ship, the Commodore intended to punish the town’s laboring community directly, as he believed that “the North End people were the Rebels.”²⁰⁵ After two tense days of negotiation, Shirley convinced Knowles to abandon his plan to bombard the North End and release the impressed men.²⁰⁶ With the safety of the town secured, Shirley sought assistance from the General Court to disperse the mob once and for all.

²⁰² Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts of Massachusetts Bay, From the Charter of King William and Queen Mary, in 1691, until the Year 1750*, 432.

²⁰³ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 70.

²⁰⁴ Pencak, *Contested Commonwealths*, 25.

²⁰⁵ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 71.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

In his letters to the General Court, Shirley admitted that the mob was largely supported by the greater Boston community and was being encouraged by “some ill-minded inhabitants and persons of influence in the town.”²⁰⁷ Given that the mob had grown beyond the original group of mariners and laborers to include the laboring community as well as a substantial portion of Boston’s population, Shirley believed that he would be able to frame the riot in a way that would protect the town from blame. If the General Court were to condemn the riot and convince both the town and the militia to once again defer to his authority, Shirley would protect Boston from “an infamous reproach upon the duty and loyalty of the town.”²⁰⁸ Bostonians feared that the riot would harm their political and economic relationship with Parliament and the Board of Trade and Shirley promised to write to them and defend the town and its behavior.²⁰⁹ On November 20, the General Court complied with Shirley’s orders and the riot officially ended.

In the subsequent days, Boston followed up on Governor Shirley’s promise that the town could escape censure if the riot was properly framed. On November 20, the Boston town meeting began this process through a formal resolution absolving its inhabitants from blame:

It being Represented that the Town had been charged or the generality of the Inhabitants with Abetting or Encouraging the late Tumultuous Riotous Assembly which Insulted his Excellency the Governour and the other Branches of the Legislature, and committed many other heinieous offences, Resolved as the unanimous opinion of the Town in this large Meeting of the Inhabitants, That the said Riotous Tumultuous Assembly consisted of Foreign Seamen, Servants, Negroes, and other Persons of mean and Vile Condition.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Pencak, *Contested Commonwealths*, 26.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹⁰ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1742 to 1757* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1885), 127.

Through this declaration, Bostonians were able to claim that the mob had never been supported by a large cross-section of the town's population. Despite reputable statements to the contrary by Thomas Hutchinson, Governor Shirley, and Commodore Knowles, the town meeting decreed that the mob of several thousand people consisted exclusively of foreigners and those individuals on the extreme margins of Boston society. Considering Boston possessed a population of approximately 16,000 in 1747, it is clear that this claim reflected Shirley's promise to allow Boston "an opportunity of retrieving their own honor" rather than an accurate depiction of the rioters²¹¹ The resolution also allowed Boston's freeholders to remind local and colonial officials why thousands of people had rioted in the first place. While the town meeting condemned the riot, their statement suggested that the rioters were not without cause:

That this Town have the most utmost Abhorrence of such Illegal Criminal Proceedings and will to their utmost Discountenance and Suppress the same, and will at the same time encourage by all ways and means whatsoever any of their Inhabitants in making the Regular orderly Application to the proper Power for redressing all and every Grievance which the town is under from the Impressing of their Inhabitants on Board his Majesty's Ships of War which may have occasioned the said Tumultuous disorderly Assembling.²¹²

Notably, while the town agreed that the rioters acted with a legitimate grievance, the town meeting also encouraged the workers to resist future impressments through "the Regular orderly Application to the proper Power." The town meeting acknowledged that laborers had been right to oppose impressment, but recommended that workers make formal appeals to town officials. Even after several thousand other Bostonians had joined

²¹¹ Pencak, *Contested Commonwealths*, 26.

²¹² *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1742 to 1757*, 127.

with workers to violently resist impressment, the town meeting denied the laboring view of corporate communalism and advocated for hierarchical rule.

In addition, Shirley's actions ensured that the laboring community would continue to be associated with disorder and violations of the Puritan Ethic. By blaming the working population for the Knowles Riot, Shirley associated plebeian culture with breakdowns in the social order. By framing the riot in this way, Boston's political elites could argue that more intervention into the laboring community was necessary to prevent social and cultural unrest. Although laborers had rioted in defense of the common good, the Knowles Riot and its aftermath deepened the divide between Boston's laboring community and imperial officials and demonstrated that corporate communalism no longer functioned within Boston society.

* * *

In the 1710s, 1737, and 1747, Boston's laboring community led three riots that undermined the town's corporate community. In the first, workers attacked the homes of wealthy Bostonians in protest of the hardship imposed on them by Queen Anne's War. In 1737, laborers unleashed four years of frustration with collusion and high prices by demolishing a series of butcher shops and two of the town's three public markets. In the third, Boston's seamen, mariners, and sympathetic laborers took to the streets after almost a decade of naval impressments had repeatedly targeted the town's working population and impeded intercolonial trade.

In all three incidents, the laboring community acted in concert with the belief that their traditional rights were being violated. During Queen Anne's War, workers protested upper class apathy after years of war allowed merchants to exploit food shortages for

their own gain. In the market riots, Boston's laborers believed that they were being disproportionately affected by higher prices and that the "proper Powers" were unreceptive to their concerns surrounding the regulated market system. Similarly, laborers in the 1740s came to believe that colonial authorities were unwilling to protect them from impressment. Especially after two members of the town's laboring community were killed by a press gang in 1745, Boston's workers saw Commodore Knowles's actions as a blatant attack on the protections granted to them under the 1708 "Sixth of Anne" law. As the eighteenth century progressed, these riots grew larger as workers drew on the economic and cultural connections that brought them together as a loosely bound but cohesive community. Through common experiences, kinship networks, and ideological outlooks, the town's laborers joined together and rioted to defend their interests.

In the market riot, laborers and their middling and upper class neighbors split as a result of their conflicting interpretations of corporate communalism. Even though the public market system harmed workers and struggling artisans, upper and middling Bostonians believed the markets advanced their own interests and denied the mob's concerns. This limited both the popularity of the actions and the extent to which the size of the riot would grow. After Governor Belcher threatened to call out the militias from the surrounding towns, additional laborers rallied to support their brethren but in the process starkly divided Boston's population. In addition, when Belcher espoused his interpretation of corporate communalism in an attempt to dissolve the riot, the emphasis on deference failed to convince the crowd that colonial officials had their best interests in mind. At the close of the hostilities, the market rioters had succeeded in shutting down

the public markets and were able to boast of twelve hundred supporters, but the town had failed to rally around their cause. Instead of unifying the town, the market riot demonstrated how contested the idea of corporate communalism had become.

In 1747, the response to Commodore Knowles developed in a similar manner. Even after several years of impressment and the subsequent decline in intercolonial trade, only three hundred laborers and seamen initially demonstrated against Knowles's press gang. Within twenty-four hours, however, the mob grew from three hundred to "several thousand" as both the laboring community and much of the town rallied to the assistance of maritime workers. However, while a large cross-section of Boston came to support the riot, eventually including even the General Court, Governor Shirley neither supported the crowd nor publicly acknowledged that they had valid concerns.²¹³ Even though upper, middling, and laboring Bostonians agreed that impressment was detrimental to the town's economic future, Shirley failed to recognize this and acted against the community's best interests. Especially after Shirley called upon the colonial militia to suppress his own town, the governor could not claim to be serving the public good. By insisting on hierarchical authority at all costs, Shirley weakened his own position and in the process brought an end to Boston's corporate community.

With the town no longer able to rely upon this ideology to bridge their differences, the resolutions brought before the town meeting served to obfuscate the actual nature of the Knowles Riot. Rather than admitting that most of the town rejected the authority of their leaders, the town voted to blame the riot on the laboring community. In doing so, Bostonians were able to condemn the impressment of laborers and protect the reputations of their upper and middling allies. While these objectives served the best

²¹³ Pencak, *Contested Commonwealths*, 26.

interests of the town, they did not restore corporate communalism. Shirley's actions and the town meeting's resolution proved that Boston's society could no longer be considered a corporate whole. Already weakened by the market riot of 1737, the Knowles Riot transformed corporate communalism from a lived experience into a rhetorical ideal.

Overall, the market riot and the Knowles riot solidified the social and cultural divisions that had developed within the town during the first half of the eighteenth century. Through common economic experiences, cultural norms, and personal kinship networks, Boston's laboring population coalesced into a loosely coherent laboring community between the Glorious Revolution and the Knowles Riot. Ranging from African American and Native American slaves to struggling tradesmen, this coalition of laborers developed a plebeian culture that inspired moments of fraternization, collaboration, and mobilization. While these commonalities helped to bring Boston's laborers together, racial prejudices and theories of white supremacy ensured that white laborers would not accept people of color as equals within a united proletariat. Instead, Boston's white laborers simultaneously considered African Americans and Native Americans to be innately inferior while still counting them among the town's lower sort. Black and white workers remained divided by social and racial tensions but this concept of community allowed them to come together in moments of celebration or protest.

As workers honed their set of economic, social, and cultural values, they would find more opportunities to come together in opposition of unfair economic behavior and imperial practices. In each instance, small groups of laborers acted to defend the needs of their larger community. While disaffected white tradesmen and other white laborers initiated the Queen Anne's War riots and the 1737 market riot, the Knowles Riot brought

together the entire laboring community, including Native Americans, African Americans, and women. The greater Boston population would ultimately come to support their actions, but laborers first initiated the Knowles Riot and used it as an opportunity to express their community's political and economic views.

As Boston moved beyond the Knowles Riot, the town's laboring community would continue to challenge the leadership of the town's upper classes. In doing so, the tenor of crowd actions would begin to change as Boston entered into the imperial crisis. Whereas workers in the first half of the eighteenth century had singled out instances of social and economic unfairness, laborers in the second half would begin to question the legitimacy of patrician rule. Asserting an economic agenda that sought to eliminate entrenched wealth and social stratification, Boston's laboring community would delineate themselves from the middling and upper classes and use the imperial crisis to challenge the British hierarchy itself.

Chapter 2: “Not on a Pope Night”: Crowd Actions and Authority in the Imperial Crisis

On July 14, 1755, the *Boston Gazette* printed a complaint against the town’s laboring community. The author, identified only as “W.K”, had traveled by ferry from Boston to Cambridge to attend the commencement at Harvard College. Upon his return, W.K. encountered “Disorder at the Ferry-Wayes, more especially on the *Boston* side.” Before the respectable passengers could disembark, a crowd of two hundred people surrounded the vessel and harassed everyone on board. According to W.K., “two Gentlemen’s Servants were thrown over, and not less than 20 of our poor slaves (Male and Female) were thus injuriously served that Evening—The most astonishing Cursing and Swearing was continually sounding in my Ears—Women as they left the Boat, were indecently talk’d to, and some of them most immodestly handled.”¹ Rather than paying deference to him and his fellow passengers, the mob threatened them and assaulted their servants and slaves. By attacking respectable members of the community “not on a Pope Night,” W.K. found the crowd’s behavior inexcusable and requested that constables patrol the ferry.²

Seven years after the Knowles Riot marked the end of corporate communalism as a functional ideology, laborers began to lash out against their signs of wealth, hierarchy, and social status through riots and public demonstrations. Although Boston’s laborers frequently participated in crowd actions throughout the early colonial era, these riots most often sought to bring attention to specific economic, social, or political grievances. In the second half of the eighteenth century, laborers expanded the scope of crowd actions and targeted structural issues intrinsic to Boston society. Growing more confident

¹ *Boston Gazette*, July 14, 1755.

² *Ibid.*

in their ability to influence town affairs, laborers displayed a new mentality that alarmed middling and upper class Bostonians.

In their coverage of the Cambridge ferry riot, for instance, the *Boston Gazette* avoided issuing their own condemnation and instead printed the letter from “W.K.” Prior to the weekly newspaper’s purchase by future Patriots Benjamin Edes and John Gill in April 1755, W.K had not appeared at all in the pages of the *Boston Gazette*.³ Shortly after their acquisition, W.K submitted two essays taken from Cato’s Letters supporting Edes and Gill’s positions on free press and government.⁴ The convenient timing of these letters suggests that Edes and Gill used the acronym W.K. as a way to assert new or controversial opinions without public association. In using the pseudonym to condemn the rioters, Edes and Gill likely feared reprisals if workers took offense at the letter. Unable to rely upon deference or hierarchical authority to protect them from the laboring community, the *Boston Gazette* chastised laborers for attacking upper class Bostonians but did so through the safety of anonymity.

Unlike the riots of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Stamp Act and the imperial crisis found laborers using crowd actions to challenge their place within the social and political hierarchy. While laborers aligned themselves with the middling Loyal Nine and the Sons of Liberty, they did so in order to undermine, rather than reinforce, deference and upper class authority. Boston’s laboring community targeted the town’s political and economic leaders during the imperial crisis not only to correct social and economic wrongs, but to assert their own social, political, and economic agenda as

³ By the 1760s, Benjamin Edes would become a member of the Loyal Nine revolutionary group and the *Boston Gazette* would become the central organ for the town’s Patriot press.

⁴ *Boston Gazette*, April 21, 1755; *Boston Gazette* May 12, 1755. W.K. also appeared on June 2, 1755 to suggest that the *Gazette* publish Alexander Pope’s poem for the Seventh Chapter of Proverbs.

well. Embracing the ideology of self-determination that would become the rhetorical center of the American Revolution, Boston's laborers attacked the symbols and representatives of imperial hierarchy and challenged upper class claims to corporate leadership. Drawing closer together as a cohesive community, Boston's laboring population used the imperial crisis to both redress perceived mistreatment and challenge the existing social order.

* * *

In the years following the Knowles riot, Boston underwent another period of severe recession. Triggered by inflation and a lack of confidence in the "new tenor" bills of credit, the downturn directly encouraged economic discontent among the town's laboring community. Throughout the recession, both workers and middling Bostonians took notice of their suffering while the upper classes went largely unscathed.⁵ In 1750, the anonymous pamphlet, *Massachusetts in Agony: Or, Important Hints to the Inhabitants of the Province: Calling aloud for Justice to be done to the Oppressed; and avert the Impending Wrath over the Oppressors*, provided context for the growing dissatisfaction with the town's upper classes.⁶ Written by "Vincent Centinel," the publication addressed Boston's failed attempt to create a Land Bank in the 1740s and lamented the current economic circumstances in which "Poverty and Discontent appear

⁵ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 106; Roger Weiss, "The Colonial Monetary Standard of Massachusetts," *The Economic History Review*, New Series 27, no. 4 (Nov., 1974): 577-592. Massachusetts introduced "new tenor" bills of credit in 1737 that were worth three times the value of the original "old tenor" bills of credit. "Old tenor" had originally been designed to equal hard currency but inflation necessitated the need for "new tenor." By the 1740s, these original "new tenor" bills were replaced by another set of "new tenor" that were worth four times the original "old tenor". As a result, the bills of credit issued during the War of Austrian Secession would have required 2.8 million pounds of silver to properly back.

⁶ Vincent Centinel, *Massachusetts in Agony: Or, Important Hints to the Inhabitants of the Province: Calling Aloud for Justice to be done to the Oppressed; and avert the Impending Wrath over the Oppressors* (Boston: D. Fowler, 1750).

in every Face, (except the Countenances of the Rich,) and dwell upon every Tongue.”⁷

The Land Bank would have issued paper money backed by subscribers’ land and had been seen by its supporters as a way to relieve the economic pressure on the middling and lower sort.⁸ Condemned by Boston’s merchants as “a more invidious form of the soft money panacea typically favored by the province’s poor and unsuccessful,” the Land Bank was defeated and the existing hard currency policy was maintained.⁹ Although Parliament had decided the issue in 1741 by banning private banks from issuing their own currency, the continuing inflation ensured that the controversy would persist throughout the 1740s.

Within this context, Centinel argued that if Boston’s merchants “had their Wills, there should no common Man own a Canoe, Fishing Boat, Sloop, or the like; but they should Fish, go a Coasting, cross the Seas *as their Servants*.”¹⁰ Raising the specter of slavery for the town’s poorer white inhabitants, Centinel contended that the colony’s upper classes had abandoned the commonwealth in favor of wealth and ambition.¹¹

Blaming merchants for the town’s economic misfortune and end of corporate communalism, Centinel believed that the divisions within Boston were the fault of “Men in TRADE AND TRAFFICK, Sons of *Ambition*, Sons of *Plutus*, who sacrifice only to MAMMON.”¹²

While the author behind Vincent Centinel (and Cornelius Agrippa, the name attached to the pamphlet’s appendix) has never been definitively identified, Thomas

⁷ Centinel, 3.

⁸ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 133.

⁹ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 133.

¹⁰ Centinel, *Massachusetts in Agony*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

Ingersoll has suggested that Vincent Centinel was actually Samuel Adams, Jr.¹³ At the time, Adams was attempting to clear his father's debts after Adams, Sr. had mortgaged his property for now worthless Land Bank notes.¹⁴ Although he was not a member of the laboring population himself, the sentiments within *Massachusetts in Agony* gave voice to a group of Bostonians who felt the upper classes were to blame for the town's overall stagnation. Boston's economy had grown over the first half of the eighteenth century, but these gains were largely concentrated in the highest tiers of Boston's society. As the town's merchant class continued to grow wealthier, Boston's laborers, as well as disaffected members of the middling sort, became more willing to directly protest patrician leadership and in the process reveal the extent to which community cohesion had collapsed.

Just as they destroyed markets to protest unfair prices and kidnapped naval officers to combat impressment, Boston's laboring population in the 1750s and 1760s attacked middling and upper class Bostonians to challenge unfair political policies and economic disparity. Centinel described this financial malfeasance in *Massachusetts in Agony*, stating that the town's wealthy inhabitants had manipulated the credit system to increase their standing and trap their neighbors in debt. Centinel reasoned that this conspiracy allowed the upper classes to grow "very remarkably Rich and Great, High, and Proud, since the Year 1742."¹⁵ Although deference still functioned through

¹³ Thomas Ingersoll, "'Riches and Honour were Rejected by Them as Loathsome Vomit': The Fear of Leveling in New England," in *Inequality in Early America*, ed. Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for Dartmouth College, 1999), 65. According to Ingersoll, the Centinel pamphlet contains stylistic similarities to works written by the future revolutionary and the timing of the pamphlet coincides with Adams's ongoing legal issues.

¹⁴ T.H. Breen and Timothy Hall, "Structuring Provincial Imagination: The Rhetoric and Experience of Social Change in Eighteenth-Century New England," *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 5 (Dec., 1998): 1419.

¹⁵ Centinel, *Massachusetts in Agony*, 9.

individual patronage, economic stratification, as well as the understanding that the town's merchants were colluding to put their own interests before those of the town, made it increasingly likely that the laboring community would use riots and disorders to challenge not just unfair economic behavior, but the political and economic leadership who allowed it to persist.¹⁶

Laborers grew confident in their ability to subvert the town's social hierarchy through the Pope's Day celebrations that grew in popularity and complexity during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Originally intended to celebrate the defeat of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, Pope's Day was first deemed an imperial holiday by Charles II. In 1665, the Massachusetts General Court declared November 5th to be a day of thanksgiving for "the miraculous preservation of our king and country from the gunpowder treason" and the holiday became an annual event two years later.¹⁷ Despite their long-standing opposition to public celebrations and political displays, Massachusetts accepted Pope's Day because of its religious significance. At its core, Pope's Day celebrated the triumph of Protestant authority over Catholic conspiracy in the defeat of the Gunpowder Plot.¹⁸ During the daytime proceedings, ministers reinforced this message by highlighting the need for Protestant virtue and denouncing "Popery" and Catholic authoritarianism.¹⁹ At night, a bonfire was lit on Boston Common, alcohol was consumed, and an effigy of the pope was usually burned. Given this message (and the encouragement of the Crown), Pope's Day became accepted in the seventeenth century as a holiday for the greater Boston community.

¹⁶ Gary Nash, "Urban Wealth and Poverty in Pre-Revolutionary America", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6, no. 4, Interdisciplinary Studies of the American Revolution (Spring, 1976): 580.

¹⁷ McConville, *The King's Three Faces*, 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Based on the depiction of Pope's Day provided by judge Samuel Sewall, the seventeenth century celebrations were relatively uneventful. In 1685, Sewall noted that minister James Allen did not even refer to "Gun-powder Treason" in his sermon. Due to rain, only about fifty men attended the bonfire on Boston Common but the following day "about two hundred hallowed about a Fire on the Common."²⁰ In 1692, Sewall noted that there was "no disturbance at night by Bonfires" on Boston Common.²¹ In 1709, the last time he specifically referred to Pope's Day in his diary, Sewall wrote that he "walk'd at night with Col. Townsend, Mr. Bromfield, Constable Williams, and a Man or Two. Find the Town quiet and in good order. Were jealous the 5th Nov[ember] might have occasioned disturbance."²²

Sewall's depictions of a peaceful, quiet Pope's Day are in direct contrast to his outrage towards Queen Anne's birthday. Beginning in 1703, Sewall had waged a losing battle against Boston's celebration of Queen Anne's Birthday, especially when the holiday fell on the Sabbath.²³ In 1714, Sewall received word of "disorders at the Tavern at the South-end in Mr. Addington's house, kept by John Wallis." Upon arriving, Sewall found a large group of people "there to drink the Queen's Health, and they had many other Healths to drink." After fruitlessly threatening to find the crowd guilty of rioting, Sewall attempted to take down the names of the men present. Even this action failed to move the crowd to disperse; Sewall noted that when he was unable to spell the men's names, "they themselves of their own accord writ them."²⁴ When compared to the

²⁰ Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 300.

²² *Ibid.*, 627. Sewall would keep his diary until 1729, but would no longer be compelled to comment on Pope's Day celebrations.

²³ McConville, *The King's Three Faces*, 53.

²⁴ Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 742.

rowdiness of the crowd during Queen Anne's Birthday, the seventeenth century celebrations of Pope's Day were a mundane affair.

After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Boston's laborers took control of Pope's Day and began to add additional rituals. Laborers first formed processions in which the effigy of the pope was hauled on a cart to Boston Common and in 1702, Bostonians included an effigy representing the Pretender, James Stuart.²⁵ In the 1740s, the devil and often his assistants were added to the cart, finalizing the standard trio that marked the symbolic intent of Pope's Day.²⁶ By tying these three figures together, celebrants linked the historical threats to Protestant England to the Catholic hierarchy and Satan himself. Like the painted faces and other disguises used in crowd actions, Boston's laborers repurposed aspects of rough music to transform the holiday into their own tradition. By including a procession, effigies, and the carting of offensive figures, Boston's laboring population borrowed from early modern punishments of public penance and English skimmington, in which community wrongdoers were carried through town on a pole or cart.²⁷ Fusing an imperial holiday with Anglo-American rough music traditions, Boston's laborers created an event that reflected their lived cultural experience within the British Atlantic. Although the Crown did not endorse these aspects of Pope's Day, colonial authorities tolerated these additions because they ultimately reinforced the holiday's central message.

Even as the bonfire, effigies, and procession became recognized as accepted elements of Pope's Day, Boston's laborers continued to infuse more intricate traditions

²⁵ McConville, *The King's Three Faces*, 58.

²⁶ Alfred Fabian Young, "Ebenezer Mackintosh: Boston's Captain General of the Liberty Tree," *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation*, eds. Alfred Fabian Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 20.

²⁷ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 472-478.

into the holiday as they drew closer together as a community. According to nineteenth century police chief Edward Savage, participants in the processions began to collect financial contributions from wealthier observers through the use of a chant:

Don't you remember the fifth of November
The Gunpowder Treason and Plot
I See no reason why Gunpowder Treason
Should ever Be Forgot
From Rome to Rome the Pope has come
Amid ten thousand fears
With fiery serpents to be seen
At eyes nose mouth and ears.
Don't you hear my little bell
Please give me a little money
To buy my Pope some Drink.²⁸

Not only did participant solicit money from their social betters, but they brazenly entered the homes of wealthy Bostonians as well.²⁹ Injecting social inversion and misrule into November 5, Boston's laboring community used the night to temporarily seize social and cultural power away from the patricians. These additions to the Pope's Day celebrations had little to do with the holiday's original intent and disquieted Boston's political and social elites.

Although English officials still encouraged the holiday, the Massachusetts Assembly attempted to ban these new changes in the 1750s. In 1753, the legislature enacted "An Act for Preventing all riotous, tumultuous, and disorderly assemblies, or Companies of persons, and for preventing Bonfires in any of the Streets, Lanes, within any of the Towns of this Province."³⁰ The law sought to prevent "tumultuous Companies

²⁸ Edward H. Savage, "E.H. Savage's Annals of Boston, 1621-1850," Manuscript, 135, Edward Savage Collection, Burns Library, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

²⁹ Dirk Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1786-1780* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 73.

³⁰ An Act for Preventing all riotous, tumultuous, and disorderly assemblies or Companies of persons, and for preventing Bonfires in any of the Streets, Lanes, within any of the Towns of this Province. Read for the

of Men, Children, and Negroes” from disguising themselves, assembling in a parade and asking “any Money, or any Thing of Value from any of the Inhabitants or other Persons in the Streets, Lanes, or Houses of any Town within this Province.”³¹ In addition, the law called for penalties for anyone who created a bonfire within ten rods of any House. Massachusetts officials believed that the changes instituted by Boston’s laboring community had transformed Pope’s Day into an excuse to harass upper class inhabitants and revel in public violence. Recognizing that workers had taken over the day of English nationalism, the colony’s leaders attempted to prevent the tradition from growing too wild and dangerous to condone.

By the middle decades of the eighteenth century, Pope’s Day had emerged as a distinctly laboring holiday that reflected the cultural values of the newly cohesive laboring community. No longer exclusively focused on instilling “an Abhorrence to Popery and Forming a Spirit of Loyalty,” Pope’s Day became aligned the Anglo-American traditions of rough music and holidays of social inversion.³² In doing so, Boston’s laborers created a holiday in which normal rules of behavior were suspended and social hierarchies overturned. This allowed laborers to ignore upper class governance and to seize control of the town’s streets. Despite the potentially subversive implications of the holiday’s transformation, Bostonians tolerated the new Pope’s Day as a way for laborers to release societal hostility in a relatively controlled manner. Even in his complaint against the Harvard commencement rioters, W.K. found the lack of deference towards the wealthy group to be outrageous because it had not occurred “on a Pope

first time Feb 14, 1756 and passed by the council Feb 17, 1756. Massachusetts Archives Collection, Vol. 88 Miscellaneous Damage by Rioters, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

³¹ *Boston Evening Post*, January 29, 1753.

³² Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 21.

night.”³³ Although most Bostonians continued to support the holiday for its unifying message, the Massachusetts Assembly sought to purge the conventions that had been added by the laboring community. Having transformed the night to conform to their cultural traditions, Boston’s laboring community used Pope’s Day to temporarily upend the town’s social structure while reaffirming their imperial allegiance.

Even though Bostonians accepted the transformation of Pope’s Day into a laboring holiday, they opposed the violence that had accompanied this change. Until the 1740s, Pope’s Day had remained a largely peaceful celebration orchestrated by laborers living predominantly in the North End neighborhood. During the mid-eighteenth century, however, the southwestern expansion of the town led to a division between the northern and southern neighborhoods and created a Pope’s Day rivalry.³⁴

As a result, laborers established two rival processions from the North and South Ends of town that would travel through the city and meet either at Cornhill or near Mill Creek.³⁵ After a pitched battle between the two groups in which “bloody noses and broken bones were the result,” the winner of the brawl would decide the location of the evening’s festivities. According to Edward Savage, “if the South were victorious, the Trophies were burnt on the Common. If the North, Copp’s Hill was the scene of the evening.”³⁶ By coming together after the fighting, laborers demonstrated that the rivalry was more about neighborhood pride than actual differences within the laboring community.

³³ *Boston Gazette*, July 14, 1755.

³⁴ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 73.

³⁵ *Boston Evening Post*, November 11, 1745; Savage, 136. Savage states that the two groups met near Mill Creek, while the *Boston Evening Post* reported that they met “in Cornhill” in 1745. Given the close proximity of the two locations, it is possible that the site of the meeting would vary depending on the processions and available space.

³⁶ Edward H. Savage, “E.H. Savage’s Annals of Boston, 1621-1850,” Manuscript, 136, Edward Savage Collection, Burns Library, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

Of the various additions to Pope's Day made by Boston's laboring community, this annual fight between the North and South End neighborhoods caused the most alarm. According to "a Gentleman of great Character" writing to the *Boston Evening Post*, these violent demonstrations had rendered the original intent of the holiday meaningless:

What a *Scandal* and *Infamy* to a *Protestant Mob*, be it of the rudest and lowest *Sailor*; out of *Boston*, or even of the very *Negroes* of the Town, to fall upon one another with *Clubs* and *Cutlasses*, in a Rage and Fury which only *Hell* could inspire, or *Devils* broke loose from their Chains there, could well represented.! Is this a meet or sufferable Show of *Protestant Zeal* against Popery?³⁷

To respectable members of the Boston community, laborers had transformed Pope's Day from a celebration of Protestant ascendancy to a senseless riot. Not only did the gentleman condemn the violence on what was supposed to be a semi-religious holiday, but he drew special attention to the presence of slaves within the mobs. Both the Massachusetts Assembly and Boston's newspapers expressed concern that Pope's Day gatherings enabled black and white laborers to fraternize without regulation or upper class approval. In addition, Pope's Day celebrations allowed slaves to engage in violence against whites without significant repercussions. In 1750, for instance, the Court of General Sessions found Sharper, a "Negro man Servant to Thomas Hill, Distiller," guilty of unlawfully assembling with twenty-two other laborers and ritually assaulting other rioters. Already singled out from a substantially larger gathering, Sharper did not contest the charges and placed himself at the mercy of the court.³⁸ Sharper's court appearance, as well as observations made by upper and middle class Bostonians, reveals that white laborers readily allowed slaves and free blacks to participate in Pope's Day proceedings.

³⁷ *Boston Evening Post*, November 11, 1745.

³⁸ At an adjournment of the Court of General Sessions, 29th Day of January AD 1750, Suffolk County Court of General Sessions of the Peace Record Book, Suffolk County Court Records, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

The participation of African Americans in Pope's Day celebrations reveals the complexity of race, laboring identity, and public tradition in early colonial Boston. Although white laborers considered free and enslaved African Americans to be subordinate members of the laboring community based on concepts of racial inferiority, white workers do not appear to have had an issue with black participation in certain demonstrations. Not only did slaves and free blacks participate in the Pope's Day processions and bonfires, but they brawled alongside and against white workers as well. Under normal circumstances, black workers would have found themselves victims of intimidation and retaliatory violence if they assaulted white workers. On Pope's Day, however, free and enslaved African American could march alongside white workers without fear of harassment or physical abuse.

The shift in treatment suggests that by the mid-eighteenth century, the social inversion traditions infused into the holiday by white workers had come to apply to African Americans as well. In the process, Pope's Day grew more akin to the black and multiracial festivals that emerged in the northern colonies during the same time. In New England, New York, and New Jersey, African Americans took pre-existing holidays, infused them with African and African American traditions, and created new, distinct celebrations. In New York and New Jersey, African Americans transformed Pinkster, originally a Dutch celebration of Pentecost, into a day of extravagant costumes, music, and feasting.³⁹ In Boston, the town's black population appropriated Election Day, which usually brought rural colonists to town to vote and hold annual society meetings. In what became known as "Negro Election Day," free and enslaved African Americans met on

³⁹ Shane White, "It Was a Proud Day: African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (Jun., 1994): 21-24.

Boston Common to drink, dance, and gamble without white interference.⁴⁰ In both Pinkster and Negro Election Day, observers noted the inclusion of both Native Americans, especially Native American women, and some white laborers. Unlike Pope's Day, however, the majority of white laborers do not seem to have attended, which suggests that only those whites who had been invited as friends, coworkers, or personal associates could join the proceedings.⁴¹

As Shane White explains, these festivals allowed free and enslaved African Americans to briefly escape from legal and social oppression. For slaves in particular, the holidays allowed them to “for awhile be in control of their lives and...transcend their normally relentless and humdrum existence.”⁴² Despite laws throughout the northern colonies banning slaves from congregating and drinking alcohol without white oversight, colonial officials allowed these to persist and evolve over the course of the eighteenth and, in some places, early nineteenth century. White argues that white northerners allowed these festivals because they believed that African Americans were imitating white practices. By framing them as a form of emulation, whites could use the holidays as evidence for racial stereotypes and perpetuate prejudice.⁴³ At the same time, it is possible that northern colonists accepted the black festivals with the hopes that they would help diffuse possible unrest within the African American population.

In 1712, 1739, and 1741, British North America reacted with alarm to the news of three possible slaves rebellions. Two of them, the 1712 slave revolt and the alleged 1741 slave conspiracy, had occurred in New York City and involved a series of fires

⁴⁰ Shane White, “It Was a Proud Day,” 17.

⁴¹ Shane White, “It Was a Proud Day,” 19; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 35.

⁴² Shane White, “It Was a Proud Day,” 30.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 28.

supposedly set by enslaved Africans and African Americans.⁴⁴ The third, in 1739, became known as the Stono Uprising after a group of African slaves armed themselves and killed several whites in a failed attempt to escape South Carolina and find refuge in Spanish St. Augustine.⁴⁵ As British colonists continued to import increasing numbers of slaves into the North American colonies, it is possible that they condoned Pinkster and Negro Election Day as holidays of social inversion. Temporarily suspending laws concerning African American gatherings and allowing slaves to use public spaces, white officials ridiculed the holidays while at the same time recognizing that they potentially reduced the possibility of slave uprisings.

By including African Americans in Pope's Day, then, it is possible that white workers acted on two separate impulses. First, white workers may have welcomed free and enslaved African Americans into their processions, bonfires, and brawls, in order to mute the racial divide within the laboring community. White workers shared the racist belief held by middling and upper class Bostonians that an uncontrolled and unsupervised African American population could turn to violence and revolt. As Boston's white workers absorbed and reinterpreted middling and upper class edicts regarding African Americans, it is possible that white workers took their own steps to prevent racial divisions from becoming revolts. Like the African American festivals, the night of misrule may have diffused tensions and in the process, ensured that white laborers could use violence and harassment to subjugate black Bostonians without fear of violent reprisals or uprisings.

⁴⁴ Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery* 38-43; Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York Vintage Books, 2005), 59.

⁴⁵ Peter Wood, "Anatomy of a Revolt," *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* ed. Mark M. Smith (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 60.

Secondly, based on the inclusion of small numbers of whites in Negro Election Day, it is possible that white workers understood the value of black holidays for slaves and encouraged as many laborers as possible to partake in their day of social inversion. As James and Lois Horton explain, the Anglo-American traditions upon which Pope's Day was based had the same basic function of allowing workers "a period of release from their bleak daily existence."⁴⁶ The Fifth of November, originally designed to bolster imperial unity and patriotism, increasingly symbolized a temporary reprieve from upper class hierarchical control. By including African Americans in their ranks, white laborers created a night in which the world turned upside down. While Pope's Day would cease to be multiracial in the mid-1760s, the holiday granted a moment for the laboring community, regardless of race, to be free of patrician governance.

Despite some concerns about disorder and multiracial crowds raised by a vocal minority, Boston officials were content to ignore Pope's Day processions and brawls as long as the violence was limited to "the very Dregs of the People."⁴⁷ Until the 1760s, Boston's upper and middling classes had at worst suffered temporary intrusion as workers entered their homes and performed "annoying" plays.⁴⁸ Officials were content to tolerate these incidents as long as they were restricted to November 5. In contrast, Bostonians had been quick to condemn the Harvard commencement riot in 1755 because workers attacked upper class inhabitants outside the boundaries of Pope's Day. As the holiday contained disorder and did not meaningfully affect the lives of the town's innocent bystanders, local leadership allowed the laboring community their day of misrule.

⁴⁶ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 35.

⁴⁷ *Boston Evening Post*, November 11, 1745.

⁴⁸ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 73.

In 1764, this laissez faire attitude came to an abrupt end. On the morning of November 5, tragedy struck the North End procession as a five-year-old child was killed after he tripped in front of one of the parade carts. For the first time, someone outside of the brawls had fallen victim to the violence of Pope's Day. Acting quickly, "the Magistrates and other Officers of the Town went to the respective Places of their Rendezvous, and demolished their Stages, to prevent any Disorders."⁴⁹ Officials do not appear to have sought the permanent end of Pope's Day, but wished to cancel the 1764 procession to prevent further casualties. Despite the attempted intervention by local magistrates, Boston's laboring community continued with the celebrations:

As soon as it was dark, they collected again, and mended their Stages, which being done they prepared for a Battle, and about 8 o'Clock the two Parties met near the Mill-Bridge, where they fought with Clubs, Staves, Brick-bats, &c., for about a half an Hour, when those of the South-End gained a compleat Victory, carrying off not only their own, but also their Antagonists Stages, &c. Which they burned on Boston Neck. In the fray many were much bruised and wounded in their Heads and Arms, some dangerously; and a few of those who were so curious as to be Spectators did not come off so well as they could wish; tho' many would have fared worse had it not been a Moon-light Evening. It should be noted that these Parties do not subsist much at any other Time.⁵⁰

Based on the *News-Letter's* depiction, Boston's laborers insisted on carrying out their brawl over the objections of the town's magistrates, but acted to restrain their own actions. When Boston officials arrived to demolish the processional stages in the afternoon, the magistrates met no resistance from the laboring community. In addition, the participants caused considerably less injuries than in previous years. Vouching for the respectful character of the laboring community, the *News-Letter* reminded readers that "these Parties do not subsist much at any other Time."⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Boston News-Letter*, November 8, 1764.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Taken together, these details suggest that the death of a child directly affected the conduct of the Pope's Day participants. The laboring community refused to capitulate to the demands of Boston officials, but acknowledged that the upper class leaders had valid concerns. As a result, workers took active measures to regulate their own community and avoided causing additional damage or serious injuries to those not directly involved. Workers persisted with the misrule inherent to their celebrations, but remained mindful of their position within the greater Boston community. Through Pope's Day, laborers demonstrated the cohesiveness, however fragile, of their heterogeneous community in both coordinating celebrations and resisting upper class authority.

* * *

As Boston's laborers transformed Pope's Day into a laboring holiday of social inversion and misrule, the town's workers grew more confident in their ability to command the streets and express their own interests and traditions. On November 5, workers had effectively claimed the ability to create a "world turned upside down" as long as the actual violence was restrained to other laborers. Participants could harass upper class Bostonians, ask them for money, and even enter their homes, as long as the brawls between the North and South End did not harm innocent bystanders. Appropriating Anglo-American rituals, laborers championed plebeian culture, developed a sense of community autonomy, and ignored upper class authority. In the Pope's Day of 1764, for instance, laborers rejected the attempts of magistrates and town officials to cancel the tradition even after a child was killed. Instead of deferring to upper class leadership, laborers regulated their own affairs and continued with the celebration.

Through Pope's Day, workers learned to subvert hierarchical structures, transgress social boundaries, and partake in violence that reflected the values of their community.

In response to obvious signs of social and economic inequality, workers began to apply the lessons of Pope's Day outside of November 5. Previously, the greater Boston population had condoned the misrule of Pope's Day as long as it was restrained to a single holiday. In the 1750s, Boston's laboring community began to break this agreement and inject social inversion into crowd actions. As described by W.K., laborers targeted wealthy celebrants returning from the Harvard commencement in both 1754 and 1755. In 1761, the Governor's Council investigated a series of incidents in which unknown persons in Boston and Massachusetts had "Endangered the Inhabitants by Throwing Large Stones through their windows into Their Dwelling Houses" and public meeting houses.⁵² In response to greater social and economic stratification, laborers moved beyond rioting against specific moments of injustice like impressment or the market system and targeted symbols of wealth and inequality. As Pope's Day grew more sophisticated, workers drew from its message of social inversion and challenged their declining status within the town.

In the 1760s, Boston's laboring community would grow bolder and repurpose the Pope's Day ritual during the imperial crisis. As workers practiced commandeering the streets and overturning patrician authority, the town simultaneously experienced a dramatic restructuring in how it would interact with Parliament and Great Britain. In 1763, England entered a new era of empire through its victory in the Seven Years' War. After nine years of war across five continents, Great Britain emerged as a major

⁵² In Council, June 25th, 1761. Massachusetts Archives Collection, Vol. 88 Miscellaneous Damage by Rioters, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

international power with new North American holdings including New France, Florida, and the huge swath of land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River.⁵³ Given the opportunity to attack Catholic France and secure their northern frontier, approximately one-fourth of all able-bodied Massachusetts men enlisted or were pressed into service over the course of the war.⁵⁴

The majority of these soldiers were drawn from the lower to middling ranks of society. Approximately thirty percent of Massachusetts provincial soldiers identified themselves as laborers, nineteen percent stated that they were farmers, and thirty-three percent claimed to be some type of artisan.⁵⁵ Although Boston accounted for only six percent of the colony's population, nearly ten percent of provincials claimed residence in the town.⁵⁶ Drawn predominantly from the working neighborhoods of the North and South End, as well as the impoverished housing located near the town's wharves, Boston's provincial soldiers prided themselves for their role in bringing about victory against France. Financially, however, this victory came at a staggeringly high cost. Between 1755 and 1764, Great Britain's debt exploded from seventy-two million pounds to one hundred and thirty million.⁵⁷ Even as Parliament grappled with how to reduce the existing debt, projections for administration costs over the newly gained territories pushed the cost of empire even higher. With little other options available to them, Parliament began exploring new sources of revenue to pay off the imperial debt.

⁵³ While the Seven Years' War derives its name from the years spanning 1756 to 1763, I am including the beginning of the French and Indian War in 1754.

⁵⁴ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 153.

⁵⁵ Fred Anderson, "A People's Army: Provincial Military Service in Massachusetts During the Seven Years' War," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (October, 1983): 508.

⁵⁶ Anderson, "A People's Army," 509.

⁵⁷ Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*, (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg by the University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 21.

Signs that debt reduction efforts would affect the North American colonies appeared in 1763. On December 29, customs collector Roger Hale reminded readers of the *Boston News-Letter* that ships arriving in Boston were required to report their cargo to the Customs House, allow customs officers on their ships, and “see that the Act of the Sixth of his late Majesty King George the Second (imposing a Duty on all Foreign Rum, Sugar, and Molasses) be in all it’s Parts fully carried into Execution.”⁵⁸ Even before customs officials could demonstrate whether they could enforce these existing laws, Grenville proposed a series of new duties and regulations, issued on March 9, 1764. Commonly referred to as the Sugar Act, the American Revenue Act set new duties on West Indian Madeira, coffee, indigo, and foreign sugar and placed stricter penalties on smuggling and the illegal importation of foreign rum. For Boston, the Sugar Act would be most directly affect the town’s merchants and distillers through a three-cent duty on molasses. Although this was a reduction from the six-cent duty found in the 1733 Molasses Act, the previous duty had been routinely ignored or avoided entirely.⁵⁹

After Boston’s inhabitants voiced their complaints against the Sugar Act through resolutions to the General Assembly, the town erupted in opposition upon news of the Stamp Act in 1765.⁶⁰ A direct follow up to one of the Sugar Act’s provisions, the Stamp Act grew out of Prime Minister Grenville’s intention to assert the right to directly tax the American colonies. As Edmund Morgan explains, the Stamp Act called for taxes on a vast array of documents ranging from attorney licenses to playing cards and dice. These taxes were rendered additionally burdensome by requiring payment in hard currency

⁵⁸ *Boston News-Letter*, December 29, 1763.

⁵⁹ Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, 27.

⁶⁰ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1758 to 1769* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1886), 121.

rather than paper money or credit. Like the Sugar Act before it, violators of the Stamp Act would be tried in admiralty courts rather than by local judges. For Bostonians, this meant that all cases related to the Stamp Act would be tried in Halifax, Nova Scotia.⁶¹

For laborers, the new taxes represented a new burden within an already difficult economic environment. Not only had the years following the Seven Years' War brought another economic recession, but a massive fire had spread through the town in 1760 and destroyed over three hundred homes. The fire disproportionately affected the town's laborers, as 214 of the 365 inhabitants questioned by the Overseers of the Poor testified that they had been rendered penniless. Of those reduced to poverty, one hundred and twenty six inhabitants stated that their former property had been worth twenty pounds or less.⁶² These figures depict a laboring community suffering from severe economic hardship, a perception reinforced by the *Boston Post Boy's* assessment of the town's financial fortunes in June 1765:

Our Trade is in a most deplorable Situation, not one fifth Part of the Vessels now employed in the West-India Trade, as was before the late Regulations. Our Cash almost gone before the Stamp Act and Post-Office Acts are to operate; Bankruptcies multiplied, our Fears increased, and the Friends of Liberty under the greatest Dispondency: What these Things will end in, Time only can discover.⁶³

For Boston's laborers, then, the Stamp Act represented a significant hazard to their already precarious economic status. Not only did the Stamp Act threaten popular forms of entertainment through taxes on dice and cards, but the duties on liquor licenses threatened

⁶¹ Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, 74.

⁶² William Pencak, "The Social Structure of Revolutionary Boston: Evidence from the Great Fire of 1760," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10, no. 2 (October 1, 1979): 269.

⁶³ *Boston Post-Boy*, June 3, 1765.

an economic survival strategy that laborers had relied upon throughout the eighteenth century.⁶⁴

As the summer progressed, Boston's laboring community began to protest the Act through public demonstrations and crowd actions. In August, laborers demonstrated the complicated nature of their opposition through two contrasting events. The first, held on August 12, 1765 commemorated the Anniversary of the Prince of Wales. According to the *Boston Gazette*, the imperial holiday was celebrated with "the greatest demonstrations of joy, and with marks of unfeigned loyalty." A bonfire was lit on King Street and toasts were shouted by Bostonians "high and low, rich and poor, young and old, white and black, bond and free."⁶⁵ Like Queen Anne's Birthday and Pope's Day, this occasion was a moment in which colonists reveled in their British identity and professed their loyalty to the English monarchy.

These festivities, however, were tinged by the discontent concerning the Stamp Act. The Anniversary of the Prince of Wales coincided with welcome news that William Pitt had been appointed "one of his Majesty's principal Secretaries of State." Given their support of Pitt but overall displeasure with Parliament, Bostonians joked that they were unfamiliar with toasting English politicians. The *Boston Gazette* quipped that celebrating Pitt "seemed a little awkward at first. It was observed that a North and a South Briton of a certain complexion, threw their faces into many violent and frightful contortions, before they could or would bring it out."⁶⁶ Bostonians gladly toasted their allies and demonstrated their loyalty to the King and Queen, but emphasized that the same affection

⁶⁴ Great Britain, *An act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, and other duties, in the British colonies and plantations in America ...* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1765), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

⁶⁵ *Boston Gazette*, August 19, 1765.

⁶⁶ *Boston Gazette*, August 19, 1765.

did not apply Parliament. Through the celebration, laborers demonstrated that their hostility towards Parliament and the town's upper class officials was driven by specific policies and governing decisions. Boston's laboring community had begun to turn against British hierarchy, but only because their authority figures had contradicted laboring needs and interests. Workers possessed no qualms about being part of the British Empire, but could not longer tolerate a hierarchical structure that violated the public good.

The second public demonstration occurred only two days later and reflected how workers had come to reconfigure the Pope's Day ritual for political protest. On August 14, 1765, two effigies were found hanging from a tree in the South End of Boston. The first, identifiable by a "Distributor of the Stamps" pendant hung around its neck, was intended to represent Andrew Oliver. The second, while slightly more abstract, evoked the symbolic rituals that had grown intrinsic to Pope's Day. According to the *Boston-News-Letter*, the second effigy consisted of "a Jack-boot with a Head and Horns peeping out of the top, said by some of the Printers, to be the Devil or his Imp."⁶⁷ Throughout the eighteenth century, Boston's workers modified Pope's Day effigies to include current political figures. Keeping with this tradition, the boot was intended to signify John Stuart, the Earl of Bute, for his role in stationing British regulars in the colonies after the Seven Years' War.⁶⁸ To reinforce the message against Parliamentary policy, the boot was described as having been "newly Soled with a *Greenville Sole*."⁶⁹

After the effigies were discovered, the owner of the tree attempted to remove them from his property and was rebuffed by laborers stationed around them. The crowd that surrounded the tree informed the owner that any attempts to remove the effigies

⁶⁷ *Boston News-Letter*, August 22, 1765.

⁶⁸ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 185.

⁶⁹ *Boston Evening Post*, August 19, 1765.

would be met with broken windows or worse.⁷⁰ With the demonstration allowed to proceed without interference, all laborers passing by the scene were forced to stop and have their goods “stamped” by the effigies until dusk, when they were taken down and placed on a funeral bier carried by six men. This platform then formed the center of a procession that at first appeared to be headed towards the laboring neighborhoods of the North End. The crowd instead detoured to a new building believed to be the future home of a stamp office and demolished the structure. The demonstrators then moved south towards Fort Hill, where they lit a bonfire to make “a Burnt Offering of the Effigies for those Sins of the People which had caused such heavy Judgments as the STAMP ACT, &c, to be laid upon them.”⁷¹

Up to this point, the crowd action had followed a script agreed upon by leaders within the laboring community and a middling group of radical leaders. Earlier in the summer, a group known as the Loyal Nine, a political and social club that consisted of middling merchants, printers, and artisans, had decided that Boston needed to resist the Stamp Act with more than petitions and complaints to the Massachusetts Assembly. Although they had been largely successful in turning popular opinion against the Stamp Act through a propaganda campaign largely orchestrated by Benjamin Edes, one of the Loyal Nine and a co-printer of the *Boston Gazette*, they did not possess the skills, connections, or respect necessary to coordinate and execute a crowd action on their own.⁷² Consequently, the Loyal Nine approached shipwright Henry Swift and shoemaker Ebenezer Mackintosh, both disaffected members of the town’s laboring community.

⁷⁰ *Boston Gazette*, August 19, 1765.

⁷¹ *Boston Evening Post*, August 19, 1765; *Boston Gazette* August 19, 1765; and *Boston News-Letter* August 22, 1765.

⁷² Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, 128.

The Loyal Nine propositioned the two men after they had grown in infamy as leaders of the Pope's Day gangs and obtained their needed assistance in organizing a demonstration. While little is known about Henry Swift other than his control over the North End during Pope's Day celebrations, his father James provides some insight into his economic status. James, described as both a shipwright and a trader, declared bankruptcy in December 1757. For the next four years, James's estate was divided and sold to cover the cost of his debts. At an auction in 1758, James's belongings included "Looking Glasses, a Chest of Draws and Tables, Feather Beds, Chairs and other Articles... a good Row Boat, a Parcel of Ship Timber, Oak and Pine Plank, a Pair of Hand screws, and other Articles, suitable for a Builder."⁷³ Even when employed in one of Boston's major industries, shipwrights like Henry and James reveal how laborers could easily slip into poverty. The lack of financial security experienced by many struggling tradesmen drew them closer to the laboring community and created a gulf between themselves and successful master artisans. With the Stamp Act looming, this personal experience likely encouraged Swift to maintain and emphasize his connection to the laboring community and take a direct role in opposing additional taxation.

Much more is known about Ebenezer Mackintosh. Born in Boston in 1737, Mackintosh was apprenticed to his uncle as a shoemaker in the South End.⁷⁴ After a brief stint as a provincial soldier during the Seven Years' War, Mackintosh returned to Boston and rose to some public prominence as an engineman in one of Boston's nine fire

⁷³ *Boston Gazette*, May 8, 1758; *Boston Evening Post* December 19, 1757; *Boston Evening Post*, April 13, 1761.

⁷⁴ George P. Anderson, "Ebenezer Mackintosh, Stamp Act Rioter and Patriot," *Colonial Society of Massachusetts Publications*, Vol. 26 (Boston: Published by the Society, 1927), 23. Mackintosh appears as "McIntosh" in several colonial sources. However, since Mackintosh spelled it in this manner in the only surviving example of his signature, I have elected to use this rendering.

companies.⁷⁵ While not an elected position, members of fire companies were granted social prestige due to the difficulty of putting out fires and the competitive rivalries that existed between companies. In order to encourage companies to arrive at a fire quickly, Boston's selectmen paid bonuses to the first engine to respond and begin extinguishing a blaze. In addition to an exemption from military and militia service, the reputation derived from service in a fire company ensured that laborers vied for the opportunity to join them throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁷⁶

Although Mackintosh never became the leader of a fire engine, his role in the Number Nine Fire Company rendered him a known entity among South End laborers. Based on his arrest for participation in the 1764 Pope's Day celebrations, it is clear that Mackintosh engaged in the yearly rituals of Boston's laboring community.⁷⁷ After he escaped with at worst a small fine in February 1765, Mackintosh appears to have assumed control of the rioters within the South End laboring community. Over time, Mackintosh's popularity within the laboring community began to translate into minor roles within the entire Boston community. For the remainder of the 1760s, Mackintosh was elected to political office several times; twice as a Sealer of Leather in March 1765 and 1768, and twice as a Fence Viewer in 1766 and 1767.⁷⁸ Although he remained a shoemaker and potentially a shop owner during this period, Mackintosh had earned the respect of both the laboring community and middling Bostonians.

⁷⁵ Anderson, "Ebenezer Mackintosh, Stamp Act Rioter and Patriot," 25.

⁷⁶ Josiah Quincy, *A Municipal History of the Town and City of Boston, During Two Centuries. From September 17, 1630 to September 17, 1830* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1852), 157.

⁷⁷ Anderson, "Ebenezer Mackintosh, Stamp Act Rioter and Patriot," 26.

⁷⁸ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, containing the Boston Town Records, 1758 to 1769* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1886), 132, 166, 203, and 235. A Sealer of Leather inspected the quality of leather to ensure that hides met minimum quality standards.

The Loyal Nine recruited Mackintosh and Swift to organize the August 14 protest based on their ability to organize the town's laborers and plan crowd actions. In selecting the respective leaders of the Pope's Day celebrations, the Loyal Nine sought an influence over the laboring community that they otherwise would have been unable to obtain. Based on the progression of the August 14 demonstrations, it seems very likely that Swift and Mackintosh planned the entirety of the August 14 demonstrations as a modified version of the Pope's Day ritual. The effigies, the procession, and the bonfire atop Fort Hill almost exactly mirrored the sequence repeated on Pope's Day. Either the Loyal Nine had studied the Pope's Day celebrations and broken them down into constituent parts, or more plausibly, Swift and Mackintosh organized the crowd action along the lines of Pope's Day to ensure that it would be accepted and carried out by the laboring community. This power dynamic suggests that rather than controlling the laboring community and dictating orders, the Loyal Nine could only request assistance from working leaders. Having practiced challenging the social hierarchy during Pope's Day, the laboring community agreed to employ their tradition of misrule for political protest.

The key difference between the August 14 demonstration and Pope's Day, however, was the open endorsement and participation of respectable Boston figures. The *Boston Evening Post* reported that the effigies were removed from the Liberty Tree by a "Number of reputable people." Similarly, the *Boston News-Letter* noted that the procession from the South End to Fort Hill included "a Great Concourse of People, some of the highest Reputation, and in the Greatest Order, echoing forth, Liberty and Prosperity!"⁷⁹ In contrast to the Pope's Day celebration of the prior year, in which Boston's leaders attempted to block the ceremony entirely, the Loyal Nine and other

⁷⁹ *Boston Evening Post*, August 19, 1765; *Boston News-Letter*, August 22, 1765.

honorable individuals explicitly endorsed the ritualistic violence at the heart of Stamp Act protests. Presumably Swift and Mackintosh had assured the Loyal Nine and other respected Bostonians that laborers within the crowd would not harm them. By including middling and upper class participants, the demonstrations on August 14 bolstered the laboring community's belief that they could use crowd actions to combat those within the British social hierarchy that defended and took advantage of economic inequality.

After the crowd burned the effigies on August 14, the gentlemen present departed from Fort Hill.⁸⁰ Emboldened by their success in the day's proceedings, however, Boston's laboring community deviated from the agreed upon script and took it upon themselves to expand the demonstration. The crowd approached the nearby home of Andrew Oliver, who had recently been named a distributor for the Stamp Act, and removed some of the "Timber and other Woodwork of the House." As the night went on, laborers returned to Oliver's home and methodically destroyed the buildings and property around his estate.⁸¹

While the *Boston News-Letter* attempted to portray the destruction of Oliver's property as part of the day's demonstration, these actions were the only part of the evening in which any authority figure, including Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, attempted to stop the crowd's actions.⁸² This sudden turn towards violence demonstrates that whereas the day's procession had been accepted by middling and upper class Bostonians within the community, the attack on Oliver's home was the work of laborers alone. By attacking Oliver's wealth and status, the assault on his property held

⁸⁰ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 100.

⁸¹ *Boston Gazette*, August 19, 1765.

⁸² *Boston News-Letter* August 22, 1765; *Boston Gazette*, August 19, 1765; Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 185.

more in common with the 1755 attack on the Harvard revelers than with the orderly proceedings of that day. Whereas wealthy and middling Bostonians only connected the destruction with the effigies and procession in an attempt to uphold the protest's validity and success, Boston's laboring community saw the destruction as a natural extension of the day's proceedings. Having already contested unfair economic policies, Boston's cohesive laboring community lashed out against Oliver for having grown wealthy amidst financial hardship. As the imperial crisis worsened, the town's laborers would continue to push the boundaries of acceptable political protest and attempt to redress their grievances by attacking elite symbols of the town's social hierarchy.

In the days and weeks following the demonstration, Boston's laboring community looked for additional opportunities to assert their own agenda within the Stamp Act protests. On August 15, North End laborers were barely deterred from demolishing the home of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson and on August 21, a mob assembled on the rumor that a recently arrived ship was carrying stamps.⁸³ While neither of these incidences resulted in a riot, they suggest that Boston's laboring community was actively coordinating another crowd action without the endorsement or knowledge of the Loyal Nine. On August 26, John McClane, a Bostonian working at Spectacle Island, was asked by a group of sailors if he was aware of any "Insurrections that should happen in Boston that night." When McClane confessed his ignorance, the sailors informed him "there was to be a Mobb greater than that at the Secretary's."⁸⁴ Despite these signs that Boston's laborers had been alerted to the upcoming crowd action through coordinated planning and word of mouth, middling and upper class Bostonians believed the threat posed by the

⁸³ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 103.

⁸⁴ August 26, 1765, Boston Town Papers, Vol. 7, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

town's workers had passed. Only two days after laborers threatened to demolish Hutchinson's home, Boston's selectmen dismissed ten watchmen, arguing that "the quiet of the Town seems now to be restored."⁸⁵ Unbeknownst to even the Loyal Nine, the town's laborers had no intention of remaining quiet.

On August 26, a group of workers assembled at dusk and lit a large bonfire on King Street. Set as a signal, the bonfire drew an even larger crowd of workers, likely white artisans, sailors, and laborers based on the descriptions made after the night was over. The crowd steadily grew on King Street despite efforts from "some Gentlemen present" to quickly extinguish the blaze and disperse the mob. The massive crowd, described by Governor Bernard as "so general and so supported that all civil power ceased in an instant," then moved from King Street to the home of William Story, the Deputy Register of the Court of Vice Admiralty.⁸⁶ The mob broke into Story's home, destroyed his furniture and specifically burned the books and papers of the Admiralty Court. Next, the crowd advanced to the house of Benjamin Hallowell, the town's Comptroller of Customs. Like their assault at the previous building, the rioters entered the building, damaged personal belongings, and destroyed what papers they could find that were associated with customs.

Next, the mob arrived at Thomas Hutchinson's home, where it became clear that Ebenezer Mackintosh had been coordinating the night's events. Mackintosh led the crowd, many of whom had likely been at the North End estate less than two weeks

⁸⁵ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes from 1764 through 1768* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1889), 172.

⁸⁶ Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 48; *Boston Gazette*, September 2, 1765.

before, and ordered them to destroy everything on the grounds.⁸⁷ Abandoning the targeted discipline they had displayed earlier in the night, the rioters shattered every window, destroyed virtually all of Hutchinson's personal possessions and papers, and carried away nine hundred pounds in hard currency. Whereas the homes of Story and Hallowell could still be inhabited, the rioters left Hutchinson's estate "a mere Shell from Top to Bottom."⁸⁸

After thoroughly demolishing Hutchinson's home, the crowd moved south to the house of Charles Paxton, the Surveyor and Searcher for the Customs Office. Upon arriving, they discovered that Paxton and his family had fled the premises with most of their belongings. After the owner of the building offered the crowd a barrel of punch, the rioters agreed to leave the premises unharmed. Some smaller groups continued to cause minor damages throughout the town, but the negotiation at Paxton's home marked the end of the night's activities and the crowd dispersed.⁸⁹

Immediately after the riot, Sheriff Greenleaf arrested Ebenezer Mackintosh on orders from the Governor's Council. Before he could be committed to prison, a number of respectable figures approached Greenleaf and implored him to release Mackintosh on the rumor that the militia would refuse to assemble if he was held.⁹⁰ Officials suspected that if Mackintosh were held indefinitely, the customs house would be torn down by a

⁸⁷ Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, 133.

⁸⁸ *Boston News-Letter* August 29, 1765.

⁸⁹ *Boston Gazette*, September 2, 1765; Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 105.

Hoerder's chronology and the timeline of the *Boston Gazette* diverge in some key ways. Hoerder believes that Paxton's home was the first to be visited, while the *Gazette* writes that it was the last. In addition, Hoerder suspects that the rioters may have split into two groups and attacked the homes of Story and Hallowell simultaneously. Given the fact that Benjamin Edes, one of the printers for the *Boston Gazette*, was also a member of the Loyal Nine, his narrative is likely the most accurate.

⁹⁰ Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, from 1749 to 1774, Comprising A Detailed Narrative of the Origin and Early Stages of the American Revolution* (London: John Murray, 1828), 126.

group of laborers loyal to him. Fearful that their place of business would succumb to the same fate suffered by their homes, customs officers convinced Greenleaf to release Mackintosh and prevent an outright rebellion.⁹¹

In the subsequent days, colonial elites quickly condemned the rampant destruction. Governor Bernard offered bounties for information and Boston's and Charlestown's freeholders empowered magistrates and militia officers to maintain the peace.⁹² In addition, the Loyal Nine, through newspaper editor Benjamin Edes, took steps to publicly distance themselves from rioters. Rather than reprinting Governor Bernard's proclamation, as the town's other newspapers had, the *Boston Gazette* presented their own narrative of the riot. The *Gazette* described the attacks as "horrid Scenes of Villainy" and declared that the mob preserved Paxton's home because they already "spent all the Rage that the human Breast is capable of."⁹³ After depicting the rioters "like Devils let loose" in his narrative of the events, Edes attempted to frame the riot in regards to earlier Stamp Act opposition:

The true Causes of this notorious Riot are not known, possibly they may be explored hereafter—Most People seem dispos'd to discriminate between the Assembly on the 14th of the Month, and *their* Transactions, and the unbridled Licentiousness of *this* Mob; judging them to proceed from very *different* Motives, as their Conduct was most evidently *different*—the Countenances of People almost universally on the former Account, apparently discover'd an Approbation; on the latter, as might reasonably be expected, every Face was gloomy, and we believe every Heart affected—At some Times and in some extraordinary Cases, the Cause of Liberty requires an extraordinary Spirit to support it; but surely the pulling down Houses and robbing Persons of their Substance, especially when an *suppos'd* Injuries can be redress'd *by Law*, is utterly inconsistent with the first Principles of Government, and subversive of the glorious Cause.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, 134.

⁹² *Boston News-Letter*, August 29, 1765.

⁹³ *Boston Gazette*, September 2, 1765.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

In the wake of their successful August 14 demonstration, Edes and the Loyal Nine were forced to separate the riot of August 26 from their previous efforts. Prior to the Stamp Act, Boston's crowd actions had been almost entirely organized and executed by members of the town's laboring community. While Boston's middling and upper class inhabitants tolerated these demonstrations, they rarely participated and opposed them when they grew out of hand. The Stamp Act, however, prompted the Loyal Nine and other respectable members of the community to reach out to the laboring community and use crowd actions as a viable avenue of political protest. Seeking the continued support of like-minded individuals within the greater Boston community, the Loyal Nine needed to define crowd actions in a way that allowed for genteel participation and support but excluded the riot of August 26 from what they considered acceptable.

The Loyal Nine walked this fine line because they knew they could not execute crowd actions without the assistance of the laboring community. While the Loyal Nine had believed that the August 14 demonstration granted them some degree of control or respect over the town's laborers, in reality the crowds had been following the leadership of Swift and Mackintosh. The laboring community accepted the air of legitimacy they had received by participating in the August 14 processions and interpreted the Loyal Nine's support as an endorsement of the anti-hierarchical message inherent to their rituals. As a result, workers believed that the Stamp Act crisis allowed them to seek retribution for unfair economic behavior and would do so regardless if they had the approval of the Loyal Nine or not. Failing to understand that they had never been in control of the town's laboring community, Edes and the Loyal Nine were forced to publicly disassociate themselves from the actions of the laboring community. As the

Loyal Nine avoided identifying themselves publicly, Edes began by reminding readers that middle and upper class organizers had guided the August 14 demonstration.⁹⁵ By reinforcing this perception, Edes was able to differentiate between two similar events. Edes stressed that the destruction of property was incompatible with their “glorious Cause,” despite the attacks on the stamp office and Andrew Oliver’s home on August 14. Edes also argued that the two riots were conducted differently, even though Mackintosh organized both demonstrations and likely led many of the same laborers. Altering the narrative to divorce the August 14 procession from the riot on August 26, Edes invalidated the anti-hierarchical motivations displayed by the laboring community and attempted to preserve the acceptability of future crowd actions.

Notably, Edes claimed that the two riots proceeded from “very *different* Motives” but declined to explain the distinction. For Boston’s laboring community, however, their actions on August 26 were a natural progression from what had occurred two weeks before. The riot of August 26 was a highly organized event that escalated into violence only after the original aims were accomplished. According to the narratives presented by Governor Bernard and Benjamin Edes, laborers organized the August 26 riot in an attempt to intimidate and prevent colonial officials from carrying out the Stamp Act. In targeting the homes of William Story, Benjamin Hallowell, Thomas Hutchinson, and Charles Paxton, Boston’s laboring community singled out colonial officials that were either directly associated with or had vocally supported the Stamp Act. At the homes of Story, Hallowell, and Hutchinson, rioters took particular care to seek out, confiscate, and

⁹⁵ Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, 128.

destroy papers related to the Vice Admiralty Court and the Customs Office.⁹⁶ These actions indicate that the violence of August 26 was actually part of a disciplined plan to extend the success of the August 14 demonstration by any means necessary. After rioters damaged his home on August 14, Andrew Oliver had publicly announced his resignation as stamp distributor less than twenty-four hours later.⁹⁷ Having already succeeded in forcing one colonial official to recant his support of the Stamp Act, Boston's laboring community concluded that assaults against property were a viable method of accomplishing political change.

The rioters of August 26 departed from the Stamp Act protest two weeks before by expanding their violent demonstration to include attacks on symbols of wealth and privilege. The rioters successfully destroyed papers relating to Customs at Story's and Hallowell's homes, but took the time to steal Hallowell's clothing, hard currency, and liquor. Similarly, Hutchinson reported that mob absconded with his family's clothing, jewelry, wine, liquor, dinnerware, and nine hundred Pounds of hard currency.⁹⁸ Going well beyond the established contours of crowd actions endorsed by the Loyal Nine, the riot of August 26 transitioned from protest against the Stamp Act to a violent assault on deference, hierarchy, and wealth.

While the mob grew increasingly violent, discipline did not break down. With the exception of some small groups that caused minor damage to the homes of the customs informer and the colony's attorney general, the central group appears to have followed a

⁹⁶ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 107. Rioters also sought out and destroyed papers relating to a lawsuit against the New Plymouth Company concerning land grants along the Kennebec River. This reinforces the meticulous detail rioters put into the crowd action and also suggests that the mob had additional guidance from wealthy Bostonians involved in the New Plymouth Company.

⁹⁷ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 104.

⁹⁸ *Boston News-Letter*, August 29, 1765.

very specific agenda. In the weeks proceeding, Hutchinson's and Hallowell's homes had been the subject of rumors and break-ins by laborers, reflecting that the houses targeted on August 26 had been selected in advance.⁹⁹ Boston's laborers selected targets that fit their dual motivations of the Stamp Act on the one hand, and social hierarchy on the other. It was public knowledge that Hallowell's recently completed home had cost two thousand pounds and Thomas Hutchinson's estate was a constant reminder of his social standing to the mariners, journeymen artisans, and other laborers living nearby in the North End. The four men were prominent supporters of the Stamp Act, but laborers also blamed them and their policies for their declining standards of living. These specific motivations ensured that other wealthy Bostonians would not find their homes destroyed. The mob spared John Hancock's impressive estate, for instance, and bypassed the Governor's home because the building would have been restored with public funds.¹⁰⁰ The meticulous nature of the rioters on August 26 suggests that Benjamin Edes was incorrect when he characterized the mob as behaving with "unbridled Licentiousness."

Inadvertently, the Loyal Nine and other opponents of the Stamp Act had encouraged Boston's laboring community to adapt their existing public rituals for an attack against the town's upper classes. In publicly celebrating the protest on August 14, where Boston's laborers had transformed the Pope's Day ceremony into a political protest, the Loyal Nine endorsed public violence as a method of engendering social change. Although Governor Bernard had issued a proclamation against the damage done to Andrew Oliver's home, Oliver's immediate resignation was widely regarded as a victory in the battle against the Stamp Act. By organizing an attack on the most

⁹⁹ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 102.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

prominent supporters of the Stamp Act, Boston's laboring community lashed out against economic and social stratification under the auspices of political resistance. Although colonial officials interpreted the riot of August 26 as a senseless attack on property, the mob consciously modified their preexisting public rituals to strike against hierarchy and economic injustice.

* * *

Rather than heralding the end of law and order within the town, as some upper and middling Bostonians feared, Boston's laborers maintained their discipline through the remainder of 1765. On November 1, in another partnership with the Loyal Nine, Boston's laboring community reprised the August 14 protest to mark the start of the Stamp Act. In the morning, Bostonians once again awoke to find two effigies hanging from the Liberty Tree. Organizers removed these effigies, representing George Greenville and John Huske, and placed them on a funeral cart. These proceedings were accompanied by several thousand protesters "of all Ranks," who followed the cart as it traveled to the Court House, North End, and back to the gallows in the South End. The crowd then re-hanged the effigies, cut them down from the gallows, and "tore them in Pieces & flung their Limbs with Indignation into the Air." Once this ceremony was completed, the crowd peacefully dispersed and the remainder of the evening was characterized by "Peace and Quietness."¹⁰¹

The laboring community's orderly behavior did not preclude the town from bracing for the upcoming Pope's Day. Town officials ordered inhabitants to "keep their Negroes in after Sun-set," and Governor Bernard sought to raise the town's militia in

¹⁰¹ *Boston Evening Post*, November 4, 1765.

order to prevent public disorder.¹⁰² As in 1747 and in August 1765, however, Boston's militia notified their superiors that they would refuse to appear if called to suppress their fellow workers.¹⁰³ Without any ability to control the laboring community, colonial officials had no choice but to trust that the Pope's Day celebration would be peaceful.

Through the efforts of Mackintosh, Swift, and representatives from the Loyal Nine, this trust proved to be well founded. Meeting on the same day as the Stamp Act protest, the Sons of Liberty had negotiated a truce between the North and South End neighborhoods to ensure a unified and tranquil demonstration. Mackintosh and Swift agreed to meet at King Street, combine their floats, and march together without tumult or violence.¹⁰⁴ On November 5, the two groups marched from King Street, to the Liberty Tree in the South End, and finally retired at Copp's Hill in the North End where they ritually burned "the Pope, Devil, and several other Effigies signifying Tyranny, Oppression, Slavery, &c."¹⁰⁵ Upon committing the effigies to the bonfire, Mackintosh and Swift ordered the several thousand laborers present to return to their homes and the evening concluded without incident. Proving their detractors wrong, Boston's laboring community demonstrated that the prior violence of August 26 had been economically and politically motivated and that the laboring community had maintained its discipline throughout the Stamp Act crisis.

In order to guarantee that the Pope's Day celebration would not deviate from the agreed upon plan, the Loyal Nine appears to have given Mackintosh and Swift financial encouragement. In a departure from previous years, Mackintosh and Swift "appeared in

¹⁰² *Boston Evening Post*, November 4, 1765.

¹⁰³ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 123.

¹⁰⁴ *Boston Post-Boy*, November 11, 1765.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Military Habits, with small Canes resting on their Left Arms” and “their Assistants appeared also distinguished with small Reeds.” In addition, the crowd included “a great Number of Persons in Rank,” participants were prevented from carrying clubs and other weaponry, and, most notably, African Americans were barred from demonstrating near the stages.¹⁰⁶ After decades of celebrations that included black Bostonians, the sudden ban on free and enslaved African Americans suggests that this change came at the request of the middling Sons of Liberty. Given the removal of weapons and African Americans, it appears likely that the Sons of Liberty sought measures to make Pope’s Day “safe” and respectable for middling and upper class Bostonians. Reflecting their own racial beliefs, and possibly in an effort to gain additional legitimacy in the eyes of middling and upper class Patriots, Boston’s white laborers readily accepted the change. Having complied with these new stipulations, “Many Gentlemen, feeling the Affair so well conducted, contributed to make up a handsome purse to entertain those who carried it on.” With the increased pageantry and strict rules governing participation, it is highly likely that this payment was for services rendered rather than a spontaneous gesture of support. Having sanitized and whitened the Pope’s Day celebration to make it safe for participation by respectable Bostonians, Mackintosh and Swift were paid handsomely to renew their relationship with the Loyal Nine.¹⁰⁷

While not as dramatic as the riots of August 26, the Pope’s Day celebrations of 1765 reveal that attitudes within the laboring community had evolved since the onset of the imperial crisis. In less than four months, the relationship between the Loyal Nine and the laboring community had fundamentally changed. In August, the Loyal Nine had been

¹⁰⁶ *Boston Post-Boy*, November 11, 1765.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

able to speak directly with Mackintosh and convince him to develop a plan on their behalf for the first Stamp Act protest.¹⁰⁸ It is even possible that the Loyal Nine, through Samuel Adams's position as tax collector, had tried to blackmail Mackintosh in order to gain leverage over him and guarantee his loyalty.¹⁰⁹ Regardless of the negotiation tactics used, both Mackintosh and Swift agreed to use their influence within the town's laboring community and organize a crowd action that supported the agenda of middling Bostonians. Presenting a unified front on August 14, Boston's laboring community adapted the Pope's Day ritual for political protest and rendered it acceptable for middling and upper class participation.

As seen by the attack on Andrew Oliver's home, this deference to middling and upper class standards did not even last a full day. As soon as the Loyal Nine left Fort Hill, laborers took the opportunity to assault the property of a public official. This attack on a wealthy authority figure escalated on August 26 and set the town on edge for the next several months. Two weeks after sacking Andrew Oliver's property, Boston's laboring community attacked the homes of four figures who represented the social and political power behind the Stamp Act's local enactment.

Four months later, patriarchal leaders came to fear that they were no longer able to maintain public order, especially when the town's militia refused to follow the orders of their superiors. Although they did not fear the laboring community, and in fact still needed their assistance, the Loyal Nine came to understand by November 1765 that

¹⁰⁸ Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, 129.

¹⁰⁹ In his study of Revolutionary Boston, Dirk Hoerder found some evidence to support this hypothesis. On August 12, Samuel Adams issued a warrant for Mackintosh in order for a little more than ten Pounds. As Hoerder explains, Adams rarely sought taxes from defaulters and had already failed to collect eight thousand Pounds from Bostonians. After the Loyal Nine succeeded in uniting the North and South End gangs in opposition to the Stamp Act, Adams retracted the warrant and Mackintosh's debt was subsequently ignored.

control over the town's workers would never be within their grasp. Rather than attempting to use deference or blackmail to gain Mackintosh's and Swift's obedience for a peaceful Pope's Day, the Loyal Nine paid the two leaders for their services and funded a more grandiose affair. Through their violent crowd actions, Boston's laboring community asserted their autonomy, advanced their political and economic interests, and undermined the hierarchical authority of the town's political elite.

In the subsequent years, Boston's laboring community continued to use disciplined violence and intimidation to oppose imperial policies. In 1768, a mob assembled after customs officials seized John Hancock's sloop, the *Liberty*, for storing wine aboard the vessel without permission. The approximately four hundred rioters responded by beating customs officers Benjamin Hallowell, whose house was assaulted on August 26, 1765, Joseph Harrison, and Harrison's son, "so that they narrowly escaped with their lives." They then proceeded to "seize a very fine pleasure boat of Mr. Harrison's, dragged it through the streets, and at last burnt it before Mr. Hancock's door" as an apparent offering for the loss of Hancock's ship.¹¹⁰ A year later, a mob tarred and feathered a sailor from the sloop *Success* after he informed customs officials that the ship had smuggled undeclared wine into the port from Rhode Island. After being forced by the crowd to "hold a large Glass Lanthorn in his Hand so that People might see the doleful Condition he was in," the mob carted him to the Liberty Tree and made him "swear never to be guilty of the like Crime in the future" in front of a group of several thousand onlookers.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *Boston Chronicle*, September 19, 1768.

¹¹¹ *Boston Evening Post*, October 30, 1769; *Boston Post Boy*, October 30, 1769.

These public acts of violence led middling and upper class Bostonians to alter their perception of the town's laborers. As the imperial crisis progressed, colonial officials and members of the press transitioned from describing workers as a coarse and disorganized "lower sort" to conceiving of laborers as an organized and dangerous threat to public order. While women seem to have been largely excluded from this formulation, upper class Bostonians appear to have included African Americans as a reflection of how the social hierarchy had broken down. After the riots of August 26, 1765, an anonymous letter printed in the *Boston Gazette* exclaimed that the laborers' command of the streets would lead to "a State of Outlawry, that every ones Property, would be exposed, to Fraud and Rapine, and no one could have an Opportunity of demanding Satisfaction in Law for any Injury done him."¹¹² Similarly, after the assault on Harrison and Hallowell in 1768, the *Boston Chronicle* believed that the town was "on the eve of a general insurrection; all owing to the turbulent spirit of popularity in some principal men in the town, who lead on the implicit mob, bawling, Liberty."¹¹³ The *Chronicle* argued that unless upper class officials could reestablish their social and legal authority, "universal anarchy and confusion must ensue."¹¹⁴

This change in attitudes extended to figures who previously supported crowd actions. At a 1767 meeting where the town unanimously voted to "be ready on all Occasions to assist the Selectmen and Magistrates in the suppression of all public Disorders that may arise," James Otis issued a speech in support of the measure.¹¹⁵ In a rejection of the Loyal Nine's strategy that had been expanded by the laboring community

¹¹² *Boston Gazette*, October 21, 1765.

¹¹³ *Boston Chronicle*, September 19, 1768.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1758 to 1769*, 225.

since 1765, Otis argued that the customs officials should be treated with respect, as the regulations established by the Board of Customs Commissioners were “a favor and of great advantage” to Boston. Despite the laboring community’s success in resisting the Stamp Act, Otis believed that no British policy could justify the organized violence committed by the town’s workers:

But let our burthens be sever so heavy, or our grievances ever so great, no possible circumstances, tho’ ever so oppressive, could be supposed sufficient to justify private tumults and disorders, either to our consciences before God, or legally before men.¹¹⁶

In their coverage of the speech in the *Boston Gazette*, Benjamin Edes and John Gill agreed that “every one will easily discern that all *violent* Efforts must be unnecessary, and consequently in the highest degree culpable.”¹¹⁷ Having previously (and arbitrarily) divorced respectable political protest from violence actions in 1765, Edes and Gill agreed that the town’s laboring community had gone too far in using mobs and disorders against the town’s upper classes.

As political officials sought to invalidate mobs led by the laborers, other upper and middling inhabitants associated the crowds with similar outbursts among English workers. In 1770, the *Boston Chronicle* printed a sarcastic declaration from the “Mayor and Corporation of Garrat” that their representatives needed to consider “the supreme legislative and executive power of these kingdoms to be vested in the lowest order of the people—commonly called, the Mob.” The anonymous author wrote that in order to abide by the demands of the Mob, they needed to execute “every man that wears a red coat” and consider every man committed to prison as “Patriots and Lovers of Liberty.”¹¹⁸ In

¹¹⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, November 23, 1767.

¹¹⁷ *Boston Gazette*, November 23, 1767.

¹¹⁸ *Boston Chronicle*, February 22, 1770.

1768, the *Boston Gazette* published a letter from “Determinatus,” who believed that Boston laborers might join with the “Weavers mob, the Seamens mob, the Taylors mob, the Coal miners mob, and some say, the Clergys mob” to unite the entire kingdom “in one general scene of tumult.”¹¹⁹ Determinatus believed that the laboring community’s unimpeded actions on the town’s streets were evidence that “the wheels of good government there are somewhere unclogged.” Interpreting the riots on both sides of the Atlantic as a sign that Britain’s hierarchical structure had begun to break down, Determinatus asserted that order could be restored if officials returned to the principles of the British constitution.

Of the critics who lashed out against the town’s workers, Determinatus came closest to identifying the true aims of the laboring community. Rather than pushing for “universal anarchy,” Boston’s laborers sought to combat the town’s social hierarchy, which they believed fostered unfair economic practices. After decades of commercial stagnation, struggling laborers had grown frustrated with the opulence displayed by public officials and merchants. The attack on Harvard revelers in the 1750s and the violent protests against customs officials stemmed from the same concern for economic inequality. By targeting wealthy leaders like Thomas Hutchinson, workers sought to undermine the town’s political leadership in order to rectify decades of financial hardship. The riot of August 26 not only dealt a blow to Stamp Act supporters, but it sought to punish those officials who had grown wealthy supporting unfair British policies to the detriment of the town’s workers. Through the protests of the imperial crisis, the town’s laboring community punished Boston’s unscrupulous leaders and challenged their claims to “good governance” over political and economic affairs. In refusing to defer to

¹¹⁹ *Boston Gazette*, August 8, 1768.

those elites who set political and economic policy, laborers by the late 1760s had come to believe that the social hierarchy itself was to blame for their troubles.

Unable to regain control of the town through status, influence, or appeals to corporate communalism, Parliament and Massachusetts officials sought to restore peace through force. As early as October 1765, Governor Bernard had received instructions to use British troops against public demonstrations if necessary. After the militia rebelled against their officers in November 1765, colonial officials, and especially the town's customs commissioners, urgently requested that British regulars be stationed in the town.¹²⁰ These requests were finally granted on October 1, 1768 when two regiments of British soldiers, numbering one thousand men, arrived in Boston from Halifax and encamped on Boston Common.¹²¹ On November 10, two more regiments arrived from Ireland, bringing a total of two thousand British soldiers to a town of seventeen thousand.¹²² Quartered in private homes and warehouses rather than in the barracks on Castle Island, the troops were be an ever present sight throughout the town.

While Bostonians initially resisted the arrival of British regulars, limitations on their behavior helped calm fears of a standing army during peacetime. In the wake of the Glorious Revolution, British intellectuals had come to understand that the crown had given up its ability to maintain a standing army.¹²³ As a result, many Bostonians argued that the regiments were a blatant violation of the British constitution. Selectmen and local officials calmed these fears by explaining that the troops could not act without explicit

¹²⁰ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 177.

¹²¹ *Boston Gazette*, October 3, 1768.

¹²² Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, from 1749 to 1774*, 214.

¹²³ Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 25.

authorization from Boston magistrates.¹²⁴ With civilian control over the regulars confirmed, selectmen backed away from their demand that the soldiers be housed on Castle Island and erected barracks on town property. Some of Boston's wealthier inhabitants even considered the soldiers not as a burden, but as a potential financial opportunity.¹²⁵ With the regiments firmly established as defenders of hierarchy and authority, and welcomed the troops as an opportunity to wrest control of the streets away from the laboring community.

For a time, the presence of British regulars reduced the size and intensity of laboring demonstrations. In February 1769, the town selectmen proudly reported to Governor Bernard that only two major riots had taken place in the town in the past year. Both of these, a celebration on the anniversary of the Stamp Act's repeal and the assault on Harrison and Hallowell in June, had taken place prior to the soldier's arrival.¹²⁶ Seen as a triumph by both local and colonial officials, former Governor Thomas Pownall reported to the House of Commons that the town's public disorders had been "reduced to the sudden unpremeditated rising of a mob for two or three hours."¹²⁷ Without incidences of organized violence on the level of those employed against the Stamp Act, Boston officials could claim that the laboring community had been tamed and hierarchical authority restored.

For British soldiers, however, the reality of the situation was quite different. The laboring community resented the regulars and resisted their presence for both ideological and economic reasons. Workers shared the concern with standing armies and felt that the

¹²⁴ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 184.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹²⁶ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes from 1769 through April 1775* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1893), 8.

¹²⁷ *Boston Chronicle*, April 24, 1769.

occupation of the town was a violation of their rights. Whereas many upper class Bostonians came to begrudgingly tolerate the soldiers due to the restrictions placed on them, economic competition ensured that laborers would resist their presence through everyday violence. Until their removal in 1770, off-duty soldiers often sought additional income by performing labor along the harbor or in the town's ropewalks. With the economy already in decline after the Seven Years' War, the soldiers represented an additional threat to financial stability.¹²⁸ This competition between soldiers and laborers ensured that tensions would remain high. Less than twenty-four hours after their arrival, the soldiers on Boston Common reported being victims to verbal abuse and rocks thrown in their direction.¹²⁹ In 1769, quarrels between soldiers and residents in the North and South Ends of Boston caused the town to deploy more watchmen to maintain order.¹³⁰ Commander Thomas Gage believed that as soon as it became public knowledge that the regulars could not act independently, "the town was treated to the Same unbridled Licentiousness as before."¹³¹ Rather than keeping the peace, the British soldiers became targets for harassment and blamed for economic decline.

The British presence also exacerbated the town's anxiety concerning its African American population. On October 31, 1768, the town selectmen heard complaints that Captain John Wilson of the 59th Regiment had encouraged several slaves "to enter into a dangerous conspiracy against their Masters promising them their freedom as a reward."¹³² In particular, Wilson allegedly specified that these slaves "beat, abuse, and

¹²⁸ Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 103.

¹²⁹ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 182.

¹³⁰ *Essex Gazette*, May 2, 1769; *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes from 1769 through April 1775*, 38.

¹³¹ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 184.

¹³² *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes from 1764 through 1768* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1889), 314.

cut their Masters Throats.” In response, the selectmen ordered Wilson to appear in court the following year to explain his behavior and commanded the Town Watch “to see that good Order is observ’d in the Night, and that they take up all Negroes whom they shall find abroad at an unreasonable Hour.”¹³³ Despite the quick response by Boston officials, rumors continued to spread that British soldiers wanted to set Boston’s slaves against their masters. In November 1769, the *Boston Evening Post* reported that three officers patrolling the South End were heard to say “that if the negroes could be made freemen, they should be sufficient to subdue these damn’d Rascals.”¹³⁴

The possibility of a slave uprising helped widen the racial divide present within Boston’s laboring community. In contrast with the Knowles Riot and Pope’s Day celebrations prior to the Stamp Act, in which free and enslaved African Americans rioted alongside white laborers, the crowd actions of the imperial crisis appear to have been overwhelmingly white. Upper class observers and newspaper editors almost always noted the presence of black Bostonians during early colonial riots and festivals, as they feared the ability of African Americans to coordinate and assemble outside of white control. In the crowd actions of the late 1760s, these same witnesses did not mention African Americans at all. As white laborers grew emboldened by their command of the streets, they appear to grown more ambivalent about their association with black workers. While it is unclear why white laborers began to sharpen the racial lines within their community, it seems to have been encouraged by the Loyal Nine and middling partnerships with white laborers. Free and enslaved African Americans had been welcome participants in Pope’s Day celebrations since at least the 1740s, but the Loyal Nine likely prohibited

¹³³ *Boston Gazette*, November 8, 1768.

¹³⁴ *Boston Evening Post*, November 1, 1769.

black Bostonians from the 1765 joint procession. Potentially seeking political legitimacy and the approval of the radical leadership, white laborers appear to have readily acquiesced to the stipulation and prevented African Americans from joining the procession. While personal connections and shared occupations still allowed for moments of transracial solidarity, the Loyal Nine and the imperial crisis exacerbated the racial divisions within the laboring community.

Despite the widening racial divide, black and white workers still had reason to join together in public protest. This is because much of the maritime work conducted along Boston's wharves, and particularly on vessels entering and leaving port, were conducted by interracial crews. As Paul Gilje explains, free and enslaved African Americans were a major factor in the maritime economy and manned early colonial ships alongside white mariners.¹³⁵ Mariners forged connections across racial boundaries during long trips at sea and in taverns and disorderly houses during leave. Even as whites as a whole within the laboring community pulled away from African American workers, personal connections were forged and maintained as a result of everyday interaction.

These types of connections would play an important role in the winter of 1770. Beginning in February, tensions between workers and British regulars continued to grow as soldiers boasted that if laborers caused any more disturbances, "blood would soon run in the streets of Boston."¹³⁶ In March, a fight ensued at John Gray's ropewalk in the South End after a white ropemaker tricked a soldier into accepting a job cleaning a privy.

¹³⁵ Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 25-26.

¹³⁶ Frederic Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770; Consisting of the Narrative of the Town, the Trial of the Soldiers: and A Historical Introduction, Containing Unpublished Documents of John Adams, and Explanatory Notes*, (Albany: Joel Munsell, 1870), 48. It is likely that these soldiers were visiting John Wilme's home because it was being used as a disorderly house. The statement was overheard by John Wilme, his wife Sarah, and one David Cockran, who was "paying a visit in the evening" and could not sign his own name. While the visit itself would not have necessarily been unusual, the "sundry other soldiers" at the home, along with a soldier's wife, suggest a larger informal establishment.

Offended by the joke, the soldier attempted to fight the ropemaker, leading to a series of escalations that culminated in a brawl between approximately forty soldiers and ten ropemakers.¹³⁷ British Colonel Dalrymple confronted John Gray and both agreed to control their men to keep the situation from spiraling out of control. In addition to the brawl, three soldiers had been savagely beaten by another group of South End ropemakers and a sergeant had gone missing and was presumed murdered.¹³⁸ Despite Gray's and Dalrymple's attempts to prevent further violence, small incidences continued throughout the weekend as both sides sought retribution.

By Monday, March 5, it had become clear that the situation would not be diffused through personal negotiations. On Sunday evening and Monday morning, several soldiers visited friends they had made within the laboring community to warn them off the streets for the next few days.¹³⁹ The situation finally erupted around nine at night when small fight broke out in an alley near one of the barracks. Incensed, British regulars began to roam the streets and openly challenge Boston's laboring community, calling "Where are the damned boogers, cowards, where are your liberty boys."¹⁴⁰ Witnesses reported soldiers running through the streets with bared bayonets and cutlasses in disregard of military discipline. As order continued to deteriorate, the town bells began to ring, drawing people out of their homes in expectation of a fire.¹⁴¹ This also served to inform the traditionally laboring fire companies, as well as sailors in port, that a riot was in progress. Arming themselves with whatever was on hand, Boston's laborers met at Dock

¹³⁷ Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 49.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹³⁹ Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 53.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

Square, Corn Hill, and the North and South End neighborhoods and traveled to King Street to confront the soldiers.

As they arrived at the customs house, the crowd met with seven soldiers led by Captain Thomas Preston.¹⁴² Preston had arrived at the customs house with reinforcements to protect a sentry and the building itself from attack.¹⁴³ The crowd proceeded to challenge Preston and the soldiers, throwing snowballs, chunks of ice, and shoving into their established perimeter. What happened next is largely unclear. While some witnesses vowed that the soldiers discharged their arms upon hearing Captain Preston order them to fire, others testified that a piece of snow or ice hit one of the soldiers, causing his rifle to discharge.¹⁴⁴ In the confusion, the remaining soldiers fired into the crowd and killed five men and wounding others. As the smoke cleared, Governor Hutchinson and other colonial officials arrived to negotiate with the crowd and the military to defuse the crisis. By eleven, the soldiers who fired upon the crowd were arrested, the remaining regulars returned to their barracks, and the mob dispersed. What had begun as a ropemaker's practical joke culminated in British soldiers firing on American colonists.

The Boston Massacre, or the King Street Riot, reveals the extent to which concepts of identity and authority had transformed as a result of the imperial crisis. Unlike major the demonstrations against the Stamp Act, the King Street Riot does not appear to have been planned by labor leaders or the Loyal Nine. While Ebenezer Mackintosh likely stayed in contact with the Sons of Liberty through the 1760s, he does

¹⁴² Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 228. The size of the crowd varies wildly throughout the witness accounts, ranging anywhere from twenty to two thousand. After the soldiers fired on the crowd, Captain Preston was informed that between four and five thousand people were preparing to attack him. This discrepancy is likely due to the stream of participants that joined the crowd as the night unfolded. Based on the descriptions of a crowd so thick that men could not pass through it, Dirk Hoerder has conservatively estimated the crowd to be around 1000 to 2000 people.

¹⁴³ *Boston News-Letter*, June 21, 1770.

¹⁴⁴ Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 95.

not appear to have been involved in laboring demonstrations after 1766.¹⁴⁵ In his absence, William Molineux, a middling merchant with ties to the Sons of Liberty, took to organizing crowd actions to resist British soldiers and enforce nonimportation.¹⁴⁶ These riots, however, usually involved more respectable members of the community and purposefully excluded sailors, laborers, and artisans. Molineux gained a reputation as a leader of crowds, but did not command the same constituency as Mackintosh.

In contrast to Molineux's demonstrations, the King Street Riot was a spontaneous action in defense of the town's ropemakers. In the trial of the British soldiers, John Adams described the mob as a "motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and mulattoes, Irish teagues, and outlandish jack tars; and why we should scruple to call such a set of people a mob, I can't conceive, unless the name is too respectable for them."¹⁴⁷ While Adams described the mob in these terms to discourage sympathy and justify the soldiers' actions in court, his depiction appears to have been relatively accurate. The five men killed included a ropemaker, a sailor, a leather maker, and an ivory turner's apprentice.¹⁴⁸ The wounded included a shipwright's apprentice, a wheelwright's apprentice, a sailor, a tailor, and a merchant.¹⁴⁹ Witnesses also described the crowd as "dirty" and "mean" and recollected hearing "boatswain's calls" during the shouting and cheering.¹⁵⁰ Some witness testimonies also suggest that women were in the crowd both outside the barracks and at the customs house.¹⁵¹ These portrayals indicate that while respectable members of

¹⁴⁵ Young, "Ebenezer Mackintosh: Boston's Captain General of the Liberty Tree," 28.

¹⁴⁶ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 219.

¹⁴⁷ Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 255.

¹⁴⁸ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 230.

¹⁴⁹ Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 288.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 106; *Ibid.*, 213.

the community did make their way towards the Customs House on King Street, the laboring community constituted the vast majority of the crowd.

In addition, the rapid arrival of workers demonstrates that without formal leaders, laborers relied upon personal connections while organizing crowd actions. Prior to the shooting, Crispus Attucks, a mariner of mixed Native American and African American ancestry, was observed leading an armed party of thirty to forty sailors to Corn Hill before turning towards King Street.¹⁵² A former slave who had escaped from his master in Framingham, Massachusetts, Attucks worked out of Boston as part of a whaling crew and in the ropewalks of the North End. Attucks likely would have clashed with British soldiers seeking work around the ropewalks and chafed at the pervasive military presence.¹⁵³ Familiar to Boston's North End laborers, black and white, Attucks would have called upon his personal connections among the town's mariners and even appears to have led at least part of the crowd assembled on King Street.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Nathaniel Fosdick, a South End ropemaker, testified that after the soldiers fired upon the crowd, he returned to the South End to arm himself and gather his associates for an attack on the regulars.¹⁵⁵ While Fosdick was directly connected to the fights between the ropemakers and soldiers that had persisted the prior weekend, Attucks appears to have had no personal connection to the previous events. Instead, Attucks used his reputation among the town's maritime workers and rallied to defend the laborers within their community.

Once assembled on King Street, the crowd demonstrated their opposition to both military and hierarchical authority. Not only did the crowd harass the soldiers arranged

¹⁵² Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 141.

¹⁵³ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 52.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 76.

before the customs house, but they denied the sole attempt by a town magistrate to defuse the crowd.¹⁵⁶ Boston officials made no other attempts to address the assemblage until the soldiers had already fired. Denying that neither the occupying British soldiers nor local officials had authority over them, Boston's laboring community rejected any claim to hierarchical British authority and took to the streets to protect their own members against outside forces.

In the aftermath of the Boston Massacre, Boston officials once again scrambled to restore order to the streets and restrain the laboring community's growing confidence in assaulting symbols of authority and power. The British troops relocated to Castle Island and Council members and middling radical Whigs worked to ensure that further violence did not occur.¹⁵⁷ In addition, some Bostonians, including those who had opposed the imperial presence, took measures to sanitize the King Street Riot in order to create martyrs and place the blame squarely on the British soldiers. John Adams, for instance, believed that the Boston Massacre would be the "night the foundation of American independence was laid," but described Crispus Attucks as "enough to terrify any person."¹⁵⁸ In his engraving of the Massacre that would become a propaganda hallmark for the Patriot cause, Paul Revere removed Crispus Attucks and other African Americans entirely. In addition, Revere dressed the crowd in respectable garb rather than the rough and practical clothing that was the hallmark of early colonial laborers.¹⁵⁹ In doing so, Revere created a crowd that reflected the Loyal Nine rather than Boston's multiracial laboring community. Rewriting the narrative for the benefit of white allies throughout

¹⁵⁶ Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 204.

¹⁵⁷ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 234.

¹⁵⁸ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 231; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 237.

¹⁵⁹ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 233.

Europe and North America, Revere and Adams honored those who had died at the King Street Riot but obscured their laboring origins.

* * *

By 1770, Boston's laboring community had established itself as an independent political and ideological force within the town. Given the opportunity to organize the first Stamp Act protest, Boston's workers and their community leaders took the imperial crisis as an opportunity to lash out against Boston's political and economic elites. As one observer explained, the Loyal Nine had formally recognized the power of the laboring community and workers, "raised first by the Instigation of Many of the Principal Inhabitants, Allured by Plunder, rose shortly after of their own accord."¹⁶⁰ As laborers gained confidence in the ability of crowd actions to force political and economic change, they transitioned from lashing out against moments of inequality to undermining social stratification and the British hierarchy. Boston's laboring community destroyed symbols of opulence and wealth, openly challenged the authority of colonial officials and the British military, and even forced the Loyal Nine to negotiate with their leadership rather than assuming obedience.

On the eve of the American Revolution, Boston's laboring community had developed a unique and cohesive ideology that reflected the social distance between themselves and the upper class Bostonians. Interested more in everyday economic survival and community than the accumulation of personal wealth, Boston's laboring community built upon the cultural norms they had developed in the early eighteenth century and integrated them into their riots of the imperial crisis. Workers, in seeking to oust corrupt officials and merchant capitalists, lashed out against social hierarchy and the

¹⁶⁰ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 198.

political policies that privileged economic individualism over community needs. In doing so, laborers began to establish who would belong to Boston's community and defined insiders and outsiders. On a political level, this involved ostracizing Tory politicians and unscrupulous traders. On a social level, this process sharpened the racial divisions between African Americans and white laborers. As Boston entered the Revolutionary War and the early national period, laborers would continue to oppose Bostonians whom they believed violated the interests of the community. The Revolutionary era would place additional strain on the laboring community, set black and white laborers on separate paths, and drive workers into conflict with Revolutionary leaders.

Chapter 3: “The Lower ranks of the People & Even Journeymen Tradesmen”: The Egalitarian Struggle Within the American Revolution

On the night of November 2, 1773, merchant Richard Clarke awoke to a loud knocking at his front door. After answering the door and speaking to two men, Clarke’s servant handed him a letter from “the Freemen of this Province” that requested he “personally appear at the Liberty Tree, on Wednesday next at twelve o’clock at noon day, to make a public resignation of your commission.” The order, relating to his consignment of a load of East India Company tea, was accompanied by the warning, “Fail not upon your peril.”¹

The next day, Boston’s bells rang throughout the town and alerted its inhabitants to assemble at the Liberty Tree. At least five hundred people, “chiefly of people of the lowest rank, [with] very few reputable tradesmen,” assembled at the Liberty Tree and awaited Clarke’s arrival. In defiance of the crowd’s expectations, Clarke and his fellow consignees refused to appear and publicly disclaim their shipments. In response, a large crowd, likely including many of those who assembled at the Liberty Tree an hour before, arrived at Clarke’s warehouse on King Street. Led by William Molineux and other members of the Sons of Liberty, the likely exclusively white crowd demanded that Clarke return his East India Tea to England. After Clarke again rejected the mob’s demands, the crowd removed the warehouse’s doors from their hinges, flooded into the building, and attempted to seize Clarke and his fellow merchants. Denied access to the merchants by

¹ Francis S. Drake, *Tea Leaves: Being a Collection of Letters and Documents Relating to the Shipment of Tea to the American Colonies in the Year 1773, by the East India Tea Company, Now First Printed from the Original Manuscript, with an Introduction, Notes, and Biographical Notices of the Boston Tea Party* (Boston: A.O. Crane, 1884), 282.

several of Clarke's friends, the crowd waited for a time, hurled insults at Clarke, and dispersed.²

In the years between the King Street Riot and the dawn of the early Republic, Boston's laboring community continued to challenge the authority of the town's political and economic leaders and undermine the British social hierarchy. Through British occupation, the Revolutionary War, and subsequent economic collapse, Boston's workers seized upon the democratic spirit of the American Revolution and promoted the ideology of radical Evangelicalism. Aligning themselves with the middling Sons of Liberty during the early 1770s, white workers within the laboring community expanded their aims beyond taking control of the streets and sought formal recognition as a political constituency.

After making gains during the Revolution, workers in the early Republic found their momentum abruptly reversed by the Sons of Liberty and other Revolutionary leaders. Frustrated with the social and political future charted by middling and upper class Bostonians, laborers split from the coalition that had guided the town through the American Revolution. As the eighteenth century came to a close, workers created divisions not just between working and non-working Bostonians, but between black and white Bostonians as well. The American Revolution and the early Republic would bring new social pressures and ideologies that would ultimately fracture the laboring community along racial lines.

* * *

As the aborted attack on Richard Clarke's warehouse indicates, the ritualized crowd actions performed by the laboring community in the 1770s remained relatively

² Drake, *Tea Leaves*, 286.

unchanged from the previous decade. Boston's white laborers, in coordination with the Sons of Liberty, continued to publicly demonstrate in order to silence local support for Parliamentary policy. While the strategies employed by laborers remained relatively constant since the Stamp Act protests of 1765, workers embraced another form of resistance in 1767. In November, Parliament levied taxes on manufactured goods commonly imported into the North American colonies like glass, lead, and paper. Known collectively as the Townshend Acts, the taxes were designed to avoid colonial arguments against internal taxation while still "defraying the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing, the [dominions in America]." ³

Despite Parliament's effort to enact laws that would placate the colonists' constitutional claims, Bostonians decried the Townshend Acts as a scheme "to raise a revenue from our toil and industry" and "support officers independent of the people, in affluence and grandeur." ⁴ In a letter to the *Boston Gazette*, "Conciliator" argued that the Townshend Duties would lead the town to bankruptcy due to its overreliance on imports. The author contended that after decades of relying upon British goods rather than local manufacturing, "this town feels the ill consequences of this folly, hundreds who were usefully employed, are now deprived of the means of obtaining a support by honest industry, and are therefore exposed to those vices which are the common attendants of idleness and want." As a solution, "Conciliator" believed that Boston had to return to the ideals of corporate communalism and discourage merchants from gaining "temporary advantages...from these ruinous exportations and superfluous importations." ⁵

³ William MacDonald, ed., *Documentary Source Book of American History, 1606-1913* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1920), 144.

⁴ *Boston Gazette*, September 28, 1767.

⁵ *Ibid.*

In October, Boston's inhabitants assembled at a town meeting and explored ways to encourage local manufacturing and discourage European imports. In a demonstration of town unity, the "very large and full Meeting" unanimously agreed to restrict the importation and consumption of British manufactured goods taxed under the Townshend Duties.⁶ The town's freeholders vowed to maintain the ban on foreign imports until December 31, 1768 and to forward the agreement to the surrounding towns. Notably, the town sought to present nonimportation as a peaceful protest in direct contrast with crowd actions and public violence.

In the same meeting, Bostonians motioned to "take all proper Measures by keeping in their Children & Servants and other ways to prevent the disturbances which have sometimes happened on or about the Fifth Day of November" and voted unanimously to suppress any actions that could "excite Tumults & Disorders" in late November. This second measure was in response to a series of broadsides found on the Liberty Tree that encouraged an armed insurrection against British authority.⁷ Rather than tying nonimportation to the public violence waged by the laboring community, the movement was presented as a virtuous way of saving the town from economic ruin.

By positioning nonimportation as a community effort, Bostonians created a coalition of support that expanded beyond the middling Loyal Nine and the Sons of Liberty and the increasingly organized laboring community.⁸ Bostonians aligned their

⁶ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, containing the Boston Town Records, 1758 to 1769* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1886), 220-222.

⁷ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, containing the Boston Town Records, 1758 to 1769*, 224- 225; Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 153.

⁸ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 139; Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Great Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: 1972), 304; Benjamin Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party & The Making of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 37. The Loyal Nine consisted of master artisans and small businessmen: merchant and distiller John Avery, printers Benjamin Edes and John Gill, distiller

strategies for nonimportation with other American ports and asserted that the boycotts be contained to “prudent and legal measures.”⁹ Distancing nonimportation from the violent Stamp Act protests not only allowed genteel members of the upper classes to join nonimportation agreements, but men and women of all economic backgrounds could participate as well. Through economic self-sacrifice, laborers who did not partake in crowd actions could oppose parliamentary policy secure in the knowledge that they were backed by middling and upper class Whigs.

The nonimportation agreements, many of which were signed in October and November of 1767, reveal that the boycotts received broad support. Revolutionary leaders like Paul Revere, Joseph Warren, and James Otis signed the documents, but were quickly followed by struggling tradesmen, laborers, and poor women. In his later history of the American Revolution, Loyalist official Peter Oliver sarcastically noted that when the boycott included “...Watches, Coaches, & Chariots, & it was highly diverting, to see the names & marks, to the Subscription, of Porters & Washing Women.”¹⁰ Although Oliver had opposed the nonimportation agreements and had plenty of personal and financial reasons to discredit them, his analysis appears to have been largely accurate. For example, George Hewes, a shoemaker, and his brother Samuel, a fisherman, signed on the same day as merchant John Rowe.¹¹ Other presumably laboring Bostonians signed the

Thomas Chase, merchant Henry Bass, painter Thomas Crafts, jeweler George Trott, and braziers John Smith and Stephen Cleverly. While a blanket term for opponents of Parliamentary policy during the imperial crisis, the Sons of Liberty in Boston referred to a group of middling to upper class inhabitants that were politically active Whigs during the 1760s and 1770s. Tied together through a dining club that met in Roxbury or Dorchester, the Boston Sons of Liberty were “men of standing” who counted among their ranks Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, and John Hancock.

⁹ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 153.

¹⁰ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 269.

¹¹ Whereas this province labours under a heavy debt, incurred in the course of the late war : and the inhabitants by this means must be for some time subject to very burthensome taxes... (Boston, 1767), AB7.B6578.767w, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

nonimportation agreements by having others spell their names for them. Benjamin White, Catherine Thompson, and Ann Nolton could only mark their names with an X to signal their support. While wealthier women also signed their names to the agreements, the marks of Thompson and Nolton testify to their willingness to oppose British authority despite limited educational and likely financial resources. Reminding male Bostonians of their place as economic actors within the community, women seized upon nonimportation as a method of protest that allowed them to contribute outside of crowd actions.

While the peaceful message of nonimportation and the inclusion of women helped garner support for nonimportation, the movement struggled in the subsequent years. Even within Boston's laboring community, workers in various occupations responded to nonimportation differently. Some tradesmen and laboring women, for instance, benefitted from the sudden demand for domestic manufacture. With encouragement from the town, members of the Sons of Liberty paid artisans to construct four hundred spinning wheels for the production of domestic textile goods. By 1770, the organizers were able to boast that three hundred laboring women and children operated the wheels for the benefit of the town's economy.¹²

For small traders and laborers engaged in maritime occupations, the nonimportation agreements dealt a significant blow to their financial stability. Anne and Betsy Cummings, joint operators of a small shop, found themselves labeled "Enemies to their country" after they refused to sign the nonimportation agreements. According to their testimony, the two women could not understand why the town would "inger two

¹² Alfred Fabian Young, "The Women of Boston: 'Persons of Consequence' in the Making of the American Revolution, 1765-76," in *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, ed. Harriet Applewhite and Darline Levy (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 198.

industrious Girls who ware striving in an honest way to Get there bread.”¹³ In October 1769, shipwrights, caulkers, and other maritime artisans objected to the agreements after it was learned that a contract to build six ships could only be completed after the Scottish captains who ordered the vessels sold banned goods. Seventy artisans signed a petition to exempt the Scottish shipmasters before Patriot John Ruddock destroyed the petition and accused the tradesmen of being “the ruin of their country.”¹⁴ Watching economic opportunity dwindle amidst a preexisting downturn, maritime tradesmen sought exemptions or withheld their support of nonimportation in an attempt to preserve their livelihoods.

As for unskilled maritime workers like manual laborers or sailors, it is unclear how much they supported or opposed nonimportation. Boston’s imports fell to half their normal level between 1768 and 1770, which would have proved catastrophic for laborers reliant on daily labor or transatlantic voyages.¹⁵ Subsequently, it appears the tradesmen who worked in occupations associated domestic manufacture were the primary supporters of nonimportation within the laboring community. It is notable, however, that the shipwrights who petitioned on behalf of the Scottish shipmasters sought only an exemption and did not seek the end of nonimportation. This is likely because the ideology at the core of nonimportation aligned with the culture of radical Evangelicalism that the laboring community had developed over the course of the eighteenth century. Derived from their common cultural values and economic experiences and reinforced through personal kinship networks, the ideology argued for a moral economy that placed

¹³ Young, “The Women of Boston,” 196.

¹⁴ John W. Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots: Boston Merchants and the Advent of the American Revolution* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 131.

¹⁵ Terrence H. Witkowski, “Colonial Consumers in Revolt: Buyer Values and Behavior During the Nonimportation Movement, 1764-1776,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, no. 2 (Sep., 1989): 221.

community needs over individual wealth and capital.¹⁶ The clashing perspectives dividing patricians and plebeians led to an urban environment in which the upper classes believed the laboring community to be sinful and poor, while workers believed the town's elite to be social and economic oppressors.¹⁷

Given this ideological division that had emerged by the late 1760s, most laborers, excluding those most directly related to transatlantic trade, supported nonimportation because it provided an opportunity to weaken the control of merchants over Boston's economy. The morality behind the boycotts was what T.H. Breen has termed "consumer virtue." Consumer virtue simply required anyone who interacted with the marketplace to exercise self-restraint in regards to the goods banned by the agreements. According to Breen, consumer virtue "linked everyday experience and behavior with a broadly shared sense of the general welfare. What one did with one's money suddenly mattered very much to the entire community, for in this highly charged atmosphere economic self-indulgence became a glaring public vice."¹⁸ Through nonimportation, the greater Boston community came to argue against ostentatious displays of wealth and inequality in the same manner that the laboring community had done through radical Evangelicalism. The laboring ideology, derived from the economic and cultural experience of the eighteenth century, rested upon the idea of a moral economy where fair wages and prices took priority over competition and individualism.¹⁹ In nonimportation, workers embraced a protest movement that allowed these values to appeal to the greater Boston population. Whereas Breen describes nonimportation as a universally binding force in colonial

¹⁶ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 220.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁸ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 265.

¹⁹ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 220.

politics, the agreements appear to have only temporarily convinced laborers that their values had been recognized and accepted by the town.²⁰ In addition, laborers used the validation of their ideology not to unite with middling and upper class Bostonians, but to redouble their attacks against upper class merchants for placing personal gain over community needs.

Unlike middling and upper class Whigs, however, Boston's laboring community acted to force the end of the Townshend Duties using the tactics honed during the Stamp Act Crisis. In the early years of nonimportation, the middling Sons of Liberty sought to enforce the nonimportation agreements through largely peaceful means. Within the law, the town's newspapers printed the names of merchants violating the nonimportation agreements. In 1769, for instance, the *Boston Chronicle* printed the names of thirty-one merchants and trade companies that violated nonimportation after their orders were found on the manifest of a recently arrived ship.²¹

The Sons of Liberty also posted broadsides throughout the town that alerted the public of individuals who had imported banned goods. These notifications let Bostonians know the individuals' name and place of business, and requested that "the Sons and Daughters of LIBERTY, would not buy any one thing of him, for in so doing they will bring Disgrace upon *themselves*, and their *Posterity*, for *ever* and *ever*, AMEN."²² The Sons of Liberty extended this treatment to anyone who spoke ill of the nonimportation or

²⁰ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 266.

²¹ *Boston Chronicle*, August 21, 1769.

²² *William Jackson, an Importer; at the Brazen Head, north side of the Town-House, and opposite the town-pump, in Corn-hill, Boston* (Boston: 1768), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

non-consumption committees and vowed to post warnings on the doors of the slanderers and deliver their names to the local printers.²³

As merchant commitment to importation wavered and it became clear that the Sons of Liberty's tactics had proven ineffective, the laboring community instituted more violent methods of enforcement. Merchants resisted the agreements because they feared the boycotts would lead to an economic disadvantage against other colonial urban centers. Many of Boston's wealthy traders avoided the economic boycotts until it was clear that their counterparts in New York and Philadelphia would sign the same pledges or boycott only those goods covered by the Townshend duties.²⁴ By placing their own economic interests over the needs of the town, Boston's merchants violated the consumer virtue and the laboring ideology of radical Evangelicalism. In response, workers took it upon themselves to punish merchants for their insistence on economic self-interest.

Throughout the imperial crisis, laborers had espoused these ideals in their protests and crowd actions and supported nonimportation because it aligned with their worldview. Boston's laboring community supported the middling strategy of nonimportation because of the ideological overlap, but never abandoned violent crowd actions. Rather than following the orders of the more respectable Sons of Liberty, the laboring community affiliated themselves with nonimportation until the nonviolent strategy proved lacking. Merchants might be willing to find their names placed in the newspaper non-compliant importers, but frequently balked at the appearance of a mob before their place of business. Governor Francis Bernard opined that the merchants who had committed to

²³ *The True Sons of Liberty and supporters of the non-importation agreement, are determined to resent any the least insult or menace...* (Boston, 1768), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

²⁴ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 247.

nonimportation did so out of “the fear of opposing the stream of the people” and a belief that skirting the boycotts would “be obnoxious to the lower sort of people.”²⁵

Less than a year after the nonimportation agreements began to be signed, Boston’s laboring community rejected the middling and upper class commitment to nonviolence and started to intimidate supporters of the Townshend duties using the tactics honed in the demonstrations of 1765. On the anniversary of the Stamp Act’s repeal in 1768, a mob of approximately eight hundred “people of all kinds, sexes, and ages” paraded through Boston, threatened the home of Inspector General John Williams, and hanged two Customs Commissioners in effigy from the Liberty Tree.²⁶ According to conflicting reports, the demonstration included African Americans, young men, sailors, and apprentices. Based on these descriptions, the crowd reflected the laboring community’s ties to the Atlantic maritime economy. As Paul Gilje, Peter Linebaugh, and Marcus Rediker explain, multiracial groups of sailors often worked together to coordinate demonstrations and oppose policies harmful to their interests.²⁷ As seamen used these instances to demonstrate their independence from social and cultural norms, the Sons of Liberty and other middling Bostonians downplayed the presence of “motley” sailors in order to claim respectability in their protests.²⁸

²⁵ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 245.

²⁶ John Rowe, *The Diary of John Rowe, a Boston Merchant, 1764-1779* ed. Edward L. Pierce (Cambridge, Mass.: John Wilson and Son, 1895), 66; Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 159. The description of mob varied based on the writer and their need to control the message about disorders and riots. Governor Bernard provided the broadest description, listed above. John Rowe, a merchant who helped organize the town’s opposition to trade regulations, looked to downplay the crowd action and described them as “young fellows and negroes.” Similarly, Samuel Adams believed them to be “a few disorderly persons mostly boys” and the *Boston News-letter* referred to the crowd as “sailors and apprentices.” These descriptions echo the depictions of the Knowles Riot and suggest that the Sons of Liberty did not organize this event and instead tried to obfuscate its support among the Boston opposition.

²⁷ Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 102; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 229.

²⁸ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 233.

Throughout 1770, laborers took their demonstrations further, as several importers suffered attacks against their homes that included broken windows, arson, and in one case, exclusion from community assistance in case of fire.²⁹ In the same year, a mob seized an importer in the South End, dragged him to King Street in a cart, and began preparations to tar and feather him. After he broke down from fear, the crowd permitted him to recover in a nearby gentleman's home. The merchant subsequently regained his strength and "solemnly promised, that if he might be spared from being tarred and feathered, he would *immediately* leave the town, and never come into it again."³⁰

These incidents, while less dramatic than the attacks on property during Stamp Act protests, appear to have been organized against the express wishes of the Sons of Liberty. After Ebenezer Mackintosh seemingly fell out of political favor with the middling activists, the Sons of Liberty had come to rely on hardware merchant William Molineux to organize public demonstrations. In the protests he led, Molineux assembled large crowds to intimidate customs commissioners and importers, but avoided violent confrontations. When a crowd of approximately 1500 marched on the homes of merchants William Jackson, Elisha Hutchinson, and his brother Thomas Hutchinson Jr. in January 1770, Molineux requested that the assemblage remain silent during negotiations. On the second day of talks, the crowd began to shout and cheer, which forced Molineux to chastise the group and send them home.³¹ Similarly, in February 1770, a mob attacked the home of Ebenezer Richardson after the customs informer removed threatening signs and decorations from an importer's shop. The scene turned ugly after Richardson fired a gun into the crowd, killing one boy and wounding two others.

²⁹ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 219.

³⁰ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 263.

³¹ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 218.

While laboring leaders like Ebenezer Mackintosh may have been willing to allow the attack on Richardson's home to continue as they did during the Stamp Act protests, Molineux prevented Richardson from being tarred and feathered.³² These divided approaches reveal that despite the efficacy of violent crowd actions, the Sons of Liberty wished to distinguish nonimportation as a separate, peaceful movement. Frustrated with noncompliant importers who seemed nonplussed by peaceful methods of enforcement, Boston's laboring community infused nonimportation with the violent tactics that they had developed in the 1760s. Seeking to bring an end to the Townshend duties and the nonimportation agreements that harmed the livelihoods of many laborers as soon as possible, workers withdrew their support from the middling Sons of Liberty who demanded nonviolence and punished violating merchants using crowd actions.

* * *

By the fall of 1770, nonimportation collapsed under the weight of its own success. In December 1769, rumors began to circulate that Parliament intended to repeal most or all of the Townshend duties. Word finally arrived in Boston on April 24 that the duties on glass, oil, paper, and paint had been removed but the separate tax on tea remained.³³ While some Patriots demanded that nonimportation continue until all of the taxes were repealed, Bostonians simply enjoyed tea too much to commit to an organized boycott. One observer estimated in 1771 that Boston and Charlestown consumed 340 pounds of tea a day, rendering Boston the most reliable colonial market for English tea.³⁴ This clear market, combined with growing concern over smuggling, convinced Parliament that

³² Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 220.

³³ Rowe, *The Diary of John Rowe*, 75.

³⁴ Drake, *Tea Leaves*, 193.

North American colonists would gladly purchase East India Company tea if it were the only source available to them.

On June 21, 1773, the *Boston Post Boy* reported that Parliament would pass a bill to "allow a drawback of the duties of customs, on the exportation of tea to any of his Majesty's colonies or plantations in America; to increase the deposit on tea to be sold at the India Company's sales; and to empower the Commissioners of the Treasury to grant license to the East-India Company, to export tea duty free."³⁵ Passed on May 10, the Tea Act granted the East India Company a monopoly on tea sold in colonial North America and allowed them to sell tea directly to colonial consignees rather than at auction to intermediaries.³⁶ By reducing the overall cost of tea and eliminating alternative sources obtained through smuggling, Parliament believed that the terms would mutually benefit Parliament, the East India Company, and North American colonists.

Although the basic contours of the law were printed in June, Boston's newspapers did not begin actively covering the East India Company's plans until early October. By this time, Thomas and Elisha Hutchinson, Richard Clarke, Edward Winslow, and Benjamin Faneuil had been chosen as consignees for the first tea shipments and were expecting them before the end of the year.³⁷ Due to the willingness of Bostonians to pay the duty on tea for the previous three years, observers remained unsure if the Sons of Liberty would mount any significant protest against the act. One Boston merchant, for instance, reported to the East India Company that "to what lengths the opposition to this

³⁵ *Boston Post-Boy*, June 21, 1773.

³⁶ Danby Pickering, ed., *The Statutes at Large, from the Magna Charta to the End of the Thirteenth Parliament of Great Britain, Anno 1773*, Vol. 30, 1773-1774 (Cambridge: John Archdeacon, 1773), 74.

³⁷ Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause : The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 224.

tea's being brought or landed, or disposed of, may be carried, must be left to time to determine."³⁸

Boston's lackluster response to the Tea Act, when compared to the mobilization in Philadelphia and New York, appears to have been influenced by the laboring community's growing disillusionment with the town's oppositional leadership. Some Bostonians believed the nonimportation protests and their original disavowal of crowd tactics had alienated the laboring community. Although the boycotts had agreed ideologically with the laboring community's economic views, the nonviolent strategy implied that the middling Sons of Liberty wished to distance themselves from the same group of laborers who had helped win the Stamp Act's repeal.

In addition, the acquittal of the soldiers in the King Street Riot and John Adams' pejorative characterization of Crispus Attucks and other members of the crowd reinforced the perception that the Sons of Liberty had only allied with laborers to serve their more genteel interests.³⁹ Furthermore, William Molineux, the member of the Sons of Liberty supposedly best suited to coordinating and organizing workers, had embezzled money allocated to fund a workhouse that was supposed to help impoverished laborers struggling during the boycotts. After a jury found Molineux guilty, he refused to repay the town, accused his fellow Whigs of deserting him, and further harmed the standing of the Sons of Liberty with the laboring community.⁴⁰ After going along with middling leadership during nonimportation, much to their own economic peril, the laboring community grew disillusioned with the Sons of Liberty and returned to the autonomy they displayed during the Stamp Act crisis.

³⁸ Drake, *Tea Leaves*, 260-262.

³⁹ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 252.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

The divide between laborers and the Sons of Liberty grew significant enough that the town's customs commissioners and tea merchants attempted to use it to their advantage. On November 5, Bostonians called a town meeting to discuss the Tea Act and a broadside known as the *Tradesmen's Protest against the Proceedings of the Merchants*. Disseminated on November 3, the broadside claimed to be authored by "the Tradesmen of the Town of Boston" and addressed the town's artisans directly. The handbill accused the town's merchants of hurting laborers by forcing them to support nonimportation and bringing additional burdensome taxes upon the town. Recognizing the financial hardship that had been inflicted by the nonimportation agreements, the broadside argued that laborers would actually benefit from the Tea Act since the tea would be sold at half its current cost. It also warned tradesmen against attending the staged resignation of consignee Richard Clarke, arguing that these crowd actions were "subversive of that CONSTITUTIONAL LIBERTY we are contending for, and that such Proceedings will tend to create Disorder and Tumult in the Town." Finally, the broadside appealed to the artisans' sense of independence and self-determination that had been developing within the laboring community throughout the imperial crisis:

We are resolved, by Divine Assistance, to walk uprightly, and to eat, drink, and wear whatever we can honestly procure by our Labour; and to Buy and Sell when and where we please; herein hoping for the Protection of good Government: Then let the Bellowing PATRIOT throw out his thundering bulls, they will only serve to sooth our Sleep.⁴¹

Juxtaposing the personal independence and moral economy sought by the laboring community with the threat of additional taxation, the broadside linked acceptance of the Tea Act to the tradesmen's future financial prospects. Imploring workers to think of their

⁴¹ *Tradesmen's Protest Against the Proceedings of the Merchants, November 3, 1773* (Boston: E. Russell, 1773), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

own interests rather than those of Whig merchants, the authors insisted that laborers not be "taken in by the deceitful Bait of those who falsely stile themselves Friends of Liberty."

While the broadside echoed much rhetoric of radical Evangelicalism that laborers had espoused against merchants throughout the eighteenth century, the proclamation was not what it claimed to be. After the hand bill was read before the town meeting, one attendee vowed that he had witnessed customs commissioner Charles Paxton handing out copies on King Street. Armed with this new information, the moderator asked the approximately four hundred tradesmen present if they acknowledged the broadside and if they "detest as false scandalous and bace the said Paper & the Person known to have distributed it--Viz. Charles Paxton and all others who have distributed the same, and the printer thereof. Viz. E. Russell."

In both instances, the tradesmen unanimously disavowed the *Tradesmen's Protest*. Finally, in a reversal of the hierarchical dynamics that had traditionally governed town meetings, the moderator asked the artisans if they "had anything to offer shewing that the introduction of Tea in the manner projected would not be detrimental to the Interest of the People in general as well as to the Mercantile & Trading part of the colonies; that they would now do it, & what they offered should be treated with candor."⁴² Despite the invitation to defend the broadside or criticize the opposition to the Tea Act, not a single tradesman addressed the meeting. Relieved that the assembled craftsmen had rejected the

⁴² *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1770 Through 1777* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1887), 142.

Tradesmen's Protest, the town meeting pledged to take "all means in their power to prevent the Sales of the Tea imported by the East India Company."⁴³

This concern over the *Tradesmen's Protest* suggests that the Sons of Liberty feared they had irrevocably lost the support of the laboring community. The Sons of Liberty originally believed that laborers had written the *Tradesmen's Protest* because it reflected the concerns for economic inequality that workers had espoused for decades. If Boston's cohesive laboring community refused to support the Sons of Liberty, the middling Whigs would be incapable of mustering the popular support necessary to intimidate the consignees and reject the Tea Act. Based on the language used in the broadside, however, as well as the information brought before the town meeting, it is very likely that local artisans did not write the broadside.⁴⁴

Instead, it appears as though a group of Boston merchants, in coordination with customs officials like Charles Paxton, printed the broadside in an attempt to hinder protests against the Tea Act. The *Tradesmen's Protest* was disseminated on the morning of November 3, the morning before the crowd broke into Richard Clarke's warehouse, and recommended that the town's laborers avoid attending the planned afternoon resignation of Clarke and other consignees. Although the broadside referenced all merchants in its attack against economic duplicity, the timing of the broadside and the references to the Sons of Liberty demonstrate that it was referring to Whigs like John Hancock and William Molineux rather than consignees like Richard Clarke. In addition, the broadside's dismissal of crowd actions contradicted the centrality of public

⁴³ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1770 Through 1777*, 144.

⁴⁴ Dirk Hoerder believes that the town's tradesmen wrote the broadside and the town meeting served as a way of shaming them into compliance. Benjamin Carp has highlighted the existence of the broadside but did not consider who actually wrote it.

demonstrations in the laboring community's traditions. Describing these protests as disorders and tumults were hallmarks of the rhetoric used by upper class officials in legislative proceedings and complaints to the press. Finally, Ezekiel Russell, who had previously printed the Loyalist *Censor* in 1771, had been tasked with printing the broadside. The choice of Russell as publisher reinforces the strong possibility that Loyalist merchants and customs officials, rather than artisans, were behind the broadside.⁴⁵

While Tory officials and merchants were savvy enough to target disaffected tradesmen with their broadside, the attempt to separate artisans from both the laboring community at large and the middling Sons of Liberty proved to be a failure. Due to their shared cultural values and similar economic circumstances, struggling artisans who failed to establish their own shops and become master craftsmen remained firmly part of the eighteenth century laboring community. These tradesmen formed a critical component of the crowd actions in the 1760s and early 1770s and had been instrumental in enforcing nonimportation through violent means. In 1769, for instance a carpenter, leading a group of tradesmen, threatened a merchant who had not committed to nonimportation by stating that "there were 1000 men waiting for his Answer...if he refused there was no saying what the consequence might be."⁴⁶ If successful, the *Tradesmen's Protest* would have undermined these efforts and limited the amount of popular support the Sons of Liberty could draw upon. By pushing tradesmen out of the Patriot camp, the Tory merchants could have created a schism within the laboring community and divided skilled and unskilled laborers over the Tea Act.

⁴⁵ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America: With a Biography of Printers*, 2nd ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1874), 155.

⁴⁶ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 151.

Instead, Boston's laboring community banded together and established their opposition to the *Tradesmen's Protest*. Much to the relief of the Sons of Liberty, tradesmen and their unskilled brethren rejected the merchants' overtures and announced their opposition to the Tea Act. Laborers did so because the Sons of Liberty had come to condemn all merchants, regardless of their Whig or Tory affiliation, for importing and selling taxed tea. The decision marked a shift from nonimportation violations, where the Sons of Liberty forgave their allies for breaking the agreements as long as they were "otherwise worthy Citizens."⁴⁷ In doing so, the Sons of Liberty not only aligned themselves with the plebeian notion of a moral economy, but began embracing laboring tactics as well. Knowing that the laboring community was critical to the success of the Tea Act opposition, the Sons of Liberty moved beyond their former position and sought to ostracize any merchant who put person gain before Boston's society.

In keeping with this rhetorical and tactical shift, merchants who had become tea consignees were targeted as "commissioners," a term which by 1773 had come to imply "men sent from the outside to impose certain views, decisions, or laws on the colonies."⁴⁸ This distinction played off of the idea of Boston as a commonwealth, a communal ideal that still held sway within radical Evangelicalism. After the scare in with the *Tradesmen's Protest*, the Sons of Liberty had rhetorically aligned themselves with the ideology of the laboring community. Rather than forcing workers to go along with their plan, middling Whigs adapted their arguments and tactics to appeal to the town's laborers. As a result, workers could readily oppose the Tea Act with the understanding that the protest reflected the ideals that they had formed over the previous generation.

⁴⁷ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 256.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

The *Tradesmen's Protest*, and the subsequent steps the Sons of Liberty took to placate artisans and unskilled workers, demonstrates the degree to which the white laboring community was seen as a distinct and coherent entity by 1773. Although some colonial artisans would have had greater economic stability and mobility than journeymen and unskilled laborers, the broadside recognized that financially distressed tradesmen, as opposed to middling men like Paul Revere, Samuel Adams, and William Molineux, identified with the laboring community. The broadside also recognized that rather than serving as an excuse for riots or other public protests, radical Evangelicalism and opposition to hierarchical inequality persisted as powerful ideas within the laboring community. By drawing attention to these views in an attempt to dissuade workers from opposing the Tea Act, Loyalists forced the Sons of Liberty to call a town meeting and more directly align themselves with the laboring community. Rather than causing friction between laborers and middling Patriots, however, the *Tradesmen's Protest* caused the Sons of Liberty to embrace plebeian views and solidified the relationship between the two groups. In doing so, laborers and the Sons of Liberty reversed the roles they had during the Stamp Act protests. In 1765, laborers had acted independently but sought the approval of the Sons of Liberty in order to claim legitimacy in their demonstrations and protests. Eight years later, the Sons of Liberty took measures to appeal to the laboring community in order to gain their support against the Tea Act. The *Tradesmen's Protest* convinced the Sons of Liberty to treat laborers as an autonomous interest group and to gain their cooperation by adopting their rhetoric and strategies.⁴⁹

With the cooperation between the laboring community and the middling Sons of Liberty restored, the two groups still faced the issue of preventing the tea from entering

⁴⁹ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 89.

Boston. In the days following the town meeting, several consignees received warnings that “the mob” intended to burn the tea if it was brought on shore and that the homes of the merchants would be broken into by “a number of picked men.”⁵⁰ On November 17, a crowd of one to two hundred people assembled at Governor Hutchinson’s home after news arrived that three ships carrying East India tea were on their way to the port. Upon finding out that Hutchinson’s sons, who were partial consignees for the tea, were not at the estate, the crowd moved to Richard Clarke’s home on School Street and “huzzued” at its inhabitants.⁵¹ Some time during the demonstration, one of Clarke’s family members fired a pistol into the crowd, leading the group to break “all his windows and window frames.”⁵² While the crowd dispersed before any further damage could be done to the home or its occupants, the brief assault demonstrates that laborers would use the violent tactics in opposition to the Tea Act that had found success in both the Stamp Act protests and nonimportation.

After the violence at their father’s home, Jonathan and Isaac Clarke approached the town selectmen on November 28 and declared that they were willing to do whatever was required of them to “stand in a favourable light with the Town.”⁵³ The selectmen rightfully notified the Clarkes that “nothing would satisfy the Inhabitants but the reshipping of the Tea to London,” and that “dreadful consequences” would ensue if the tea was not returned. As merchants who returned tea to England would have their ship and cargo seized by customs officials, the Clarkes could only promise that they would not

⁵⁰ Drake, *Tea Leaves*, 291-294.

⁵¹ *Massachusetts Spy*, November 18, 1773. This behavior reflects another aspect of charivari, in which individuals who ran counter to the town’s wishes were treated to “rough music” until they either capitulated or fled.

⁵² Rowe, *The Diary of John Rowe*, 80.

⁵³ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen’s Minutes from 1769 Through April, 1775* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1893), 203.

smuggle the tea on shore and would not unload the ships until further orders from the East India Company could be obtained.⁵⁴

These terms established a contentious standoff as two of the three tea ships, the *Dartmouth* and the *Eleanor*, arrived at Griffin's Wharf in early December.⁵⁵ With a December 17 deadline looming that allowed customs commissioners to seize, unload, and sell the tea if duties on the cargo were not paid, the Old South Meetinghouse became home to a series of public meetings between the Sons of Liberty, the ship captains who carried the tea, and the general public.⁵⁶ While the shift away from Faneuil Hall was justified by the belief that Faneuil Hall could not accommodate the number of freeholders who wished to attend, the transition to the "Body of the People" allowed unpropertied members of the community to attend.⁵⁷ According to Governor Hutchinson, these meetings "consisted principally of the Lower ranks of the People & even Journeymen Tradesmen were brought in to increase the number & the Rabble were not excluded yet there were divers Gentlemen of Good Fortunes among them."⁵⁸

This strategy, in which white laborers were invited into the formal decision making progress with middling and upper class Whigs, built upon efforts to regulate merchants during nonimportation. As Boston's merchants grew increasingly divided over the binding power of nonimportation, the Sons of Liberty had been forced to broaden their regulatory committee in order to claim public legitimacy. Out of political necessity, the merchants first transitioned from an elite group known as the Boston Society for

⁵⁴ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes from 1769 Through April, 1775* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1893), 203; Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 93.

⁵⁵ The third ship, the *Beaver*, had arrived with smallpox on December 7 and remained at Rainsford's Island until December 13. A fourth ship, the *William*, struck a sandbar off of Cape Cod on December 10 and was subsequently destroyed in a storm.

⁵⁶ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 97.

⁵⁷ Drake, *Tea Leaves*, 321; Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 99.

⁵⁸ Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 42.

Encouraging Trade and Commerce, to a larger collection of Merchants and Traders, and finally to what became known as “The Body.” Meeting for the first time in 1770, “The Body” consisted of 1,000 to 1,400 men who likely would have qualified to attend town meetings.⁵⁹ In a pattern that mirrored the independent streak of workers during the Stamp Act protests, the laborers present, presumably artisans, had taken full advantage of their inclusion. As John W. Tyler explains, “the merchants, as some of them soon found, having raised the devil by inviting popular participation in their deliberations, would encounter much difficulty in setting him back to rest.”⁶⁰

Seeking to quickly mobilize the laboring community, especially those who might have been reluctant to once again align themselves with the middling and upper class Whigs, the Sons of Liberty went a step beyond “the Body” during nonimportation and invited essentially all white males. This expansion of the political process, however brief and informal, marked a dramatic change from what the laboring community had previously experienced. Throughout the eighteenth century, workers had been excluded, both by property requirements and extralegal means, from attending controversial town meetings. With most workers unable to vote and thereby influence community affairs, laborers relied on public demonstrations and crowd actions to espouse their social and economic views. In moving to the Old South Meetinghouse, the Sons of Liberty abandoned the legal standards of a Faneuil Hall town meeting and enabled all white males to contribute.

By shifting the emphasis from public demonstrations to formal proceedings, “the Body” allowed for a greater inclusiveness across class lines, but restricted transracial

⁵⁹ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 144.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

cooperation. Free and enslaved African Americans who had previously been able to join in crowd actions alongside white workers suddenly found themselves unable to participate. Similar to the Stamp Act protests, white laborers readily accepted the legitimacy afforded to them by the Sons of Liberty even when it meant ostracizing the African Americans who demonstrated alongside them throughout the eighteenth century. White workers readily accepted this bargain because for many laborers, “the Body of the People” allowed many white workers to experience enfranchisement for the first time. In order to vote in a town meeting, the colony of Massachusetts required an inhabitant to possess an estate valued over twenty pounds.⁶¹ While seventy to eighty percent of white males in rural communities met this requirement, large urban centers like Boston had a much lower level of white male suffrage. According to Alexander Keyssar, only about half of Boston’s white men could vote in the colonial era.⁶² Subsequently, the “Body of the People” would have been the first time many struggling laborers and tradesmen were able to formally participate in a public meeting. Already driven to oppose British policies by their idea of a moral economy and radical Evangelicalism, white laborers found that their violent protests had granted them the same political status as their middling and upper class neighbors. Through the *Tradesmen's Protest* and the “Body of the People,” the laboring community convinced the Sons of Liberty of their critical importance to town affairs and entered into Boston’s formal politics.

At the Old South Meetinghouse, the approximately 2,500 attendees sought to convince the ship captains and consignees to send the tea back to England and

⁶¹ Massachusetts General Court, *The Charter and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 544.

⁶² Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 6.

coordinated anti-tea strategies with neighboring towns and seaports.⁶³ These meetings continued through December 16, where the assembly debated what should be done if the tea could not be returned to England. White laborers in the gallery suggested dragging the ships onto Boston Common and burning them, confiscating and burning just the tea, and throwing the tea into Boston Harbor.⁶⁴ The first two options reflected the tradition of burning effigies on Pope's Day, as well as an earlier protest in 1768 in which laborers seized a small ship and burned it in front of John Hancock's home. The third, throwing the tea into Boston Harbor, echoed the destruction of property for political purposes that had been a hallmark of economic riots throughout the eighteenth century. In the market riot of 1737, for instance, workers demolished butcher stalls and two markets in order to protest high prices and unfair commercial monopolies. In doing so, laborers prevented the markets from functioning without risking the lives of Bostonians. In the same way, throwing the tea into Boston Harbor prevented the Tea Act from being executed without further physical violence to British officials or consignees. Although the middling Sons of Liberty moderated "The Body of the People," the suggestions from those assembled reflected laboring political traditions.⁶⁵

Upon learning that Governor Hutchinson had denied the last ditch effort to return the tea to England, "The Body of the People" decreed that they had been "counter-worked by the Consignees of the Tea, and their Coadjutors, who have plainly manifested their inclination of throwing the Community into the most violent commotions" and voted to formally dissolve.⁶⁶ By asserting that the crowd at the Old South Meetinghouse

⁶³ Rowe, *The Diary of John Rowe*, 81; Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 108-111.

⁶⁴ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 120.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, December 20, 1773.

was a legal governing assembly, the Body could argue that the consignees, the customs officials, and Governor Hutchinson opposed peaceful deliberations and encouraged “violent commotions.” As the meeting drew to a close, “a number of Persons, supposed to be the Aboriginal Natives from their complection, approaching near the door of the assembly, gave the War-Whoop, which was answered by a few in the galleries of the house where the assembly was convened.”⁶⁷

The “Natives,” who had prepared their disguises at the printing office of Edes and Gill and near the Liberty Tree in the South End, made their way to Griffin’s Wharf where they were joined by members of the Sons of Liberty, the Old South Body of the People, and other members of the Boston community.⁶⁸ Together, the group cast 342 chests of tea from the three merchant ships into the Boston harbor. After trying to work within the law for several weeks, the Sons of Liberty embraced the tactics of the laboring community and turned to destroying personal property in the name of political opposition.

The blatant illegality of the protest, as well as the planning required to board three merchant ships in close proximity to British naval vessels, necessitated a level of secrecy unseen in previous crowd actions. This kept the core group of protesters small and discouraged participants from giving advance notice to the bulk of the laboring community. Based on contemporary accounts and later memoirs, historian Alfred Young believes that this strategy led to three different types of participants: thirty to fifty invited men, semi-invited volunteers who had received some advanced notice, and self-invited individuals who joined the proceedings as the night progressed.⁶⁹ Men like George Robert Twelves Hewes, for instance, believed the original group to have numbered

⁶⁷ *Boston Evening Post*, December 20, 1773.

⁶⁸ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 262.

⁶⁹ Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 99.

between fifteen and twenty and interpreted the “War Whoop” outside the Old South Meetinghouse to be an invitation to join them. Hewes subsequently traveled to Boylston’s Wharf to blacken his face at a blacksmith’s shop, obtain a blanket from a friend, and joined the group wearing his hasty disguise. When he arrived at Griffin’s Wharf, Hewes found that many of his confederates had created similar motley disguises from “old frocks, red woolen caps, gowns, and all manner of like devices.”⁷⁰

While Bostonians had disguised their faces in crowd actions throughout the eighteenth century, most notably during the market riot of 1737, the adoption of Native American costumes was a relatively new phenomenon. According to Philip Deloria, Americans began “playing Indian” in riots and public rituals in order to symbolize their transgressive actions and to distinguish their actions from their British identity. The disguises built upon the ritualistic aspects of Anglo-American rough music but infused a uniquely North American context. By replicating the stereotypes they had invented about Native Americans, including freedom, individualism, nativity, and savagery, English colonists donned an identity that allowed them to exist outside the reach of imperial officials.⁷¹ In the words of Deloria, the Indian disguises allowed the Tea Party rioters to “cross the boundaries of civilized law in order to attack specific laws that displeased them and to speak to the British from a quintessentially American position.”⁷² Disguising themselves as “Aboriginal Natives” allowed colonists to protest imperial authority by appropriating the identity of those considered quintessentially American. Those rioters unable to obtain Native American disguises resorted to the costumes that Anglo-

⁷⁰ B.B. Thatcher, *Traits of the Tea Party, Being a Memoir of George R.T. Hewes, One of the Last of its Survivors, with a History of that Transaction, Reminiscences of the Massacre, and the Siege, and Other Stories of Old Times* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 181.

⁷¹ Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 26.

⁷² Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 31.

Americans often associated with rough music. Although they could not specifically claim association with an American identity through their dress, individuals like George Robert Twelves Hewes relied upon the idea of social inversion and misrule to register their opposition with British authority. In this way, the Tea Party rioters combined American symbolism and Anglo-American ritual to establish themselves as subversive American colonists and oppose British policies.

Although descriptions of the Boston Tea Party drew specific attention to the Native American disguises worn by the core organizers, the identity of the rioters themselves can never be fully determined. Scanty evidence and biographies from the antebellum era allow for a conservative list of ninety-nine protesters.⁷³ Even when considering the organizational presence of Loyal Nine and Sons of Liberty Members like distiller Thomas Chase, printer Benjamin Edes, and merchant William Molineux, manual laborers and skilled tradesmen constituted the vast majority of Tea Party participants. Forty-eight of the identifiable men were employed as artisans in trades that ranged from shoemakers to silversmiths. An additional eleven men worked in a trade but remained either apprentices or artisans. These tradesmen were joined by eleven unskilled laborers, employed primarily as mariners and coastal traders, ten merchants, and fifteen farmers, clerks, and other men from the middling ranks of society.⁷⁴ Taken as a whole, the Tea Party participants reflected a cross section of Boston's white laborers and their allies within the Sons of Liberty. It is possible that African Americans participated in the Boston Tea Party, especially because many had expertise with loading and unloading

⁷³ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 234. Carp limited the potential candidates based on claims made before 1853. Longer lists exist, but rely upon claims made by descendants of potential participants rather than the individuals themselves.

⁷⁴ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 234.

ships, but neither contemporary accounts nor nineteenth century histories and memories recorded their presence.

While the middling Sons of Liberty had planned the Boston Tea Party, it appears likely that the group had learned from their struggles coordinating with laborers during nonimportation. Rather than establishing a strategy and hoping that the laboring community would accept it, the Sons of Liberty crafted a crowd action that reflected the laboring tradition of destroying property for economic and political protest. In addition, the Sons of Liberty relied upon laboring representatives from the North and South End, as they had in the first Stamp Act protest, to handle the organization efforts. The group that assembled at the printing office of Edes and Gill included North End caulkers, joiners, and ship carpenters and served a similar role to Henry Swift in the original Stamp Act protests.⁷⁵ As Benjamin Carp explains, organizers likely chose these men because they knew how to quickly unload a ship, often without verbal instructions. When more members of the laboring community arrived, additional sailors joined this effort and "aided in hosting the chests from the hold."⁷⁶ The need for trusted men who could work efficiently suggests that the Sons of Liberty needed to rely heavily on leaders within the laboring community to handpick the core participants.

For the South End contingent that met at the Liberty Tree, it is very likely that the Sons of Liberty once again turned to Ebenezer Mackintosh for this task.⁷⁷ A Mr.

McIntosh was listed as a participant in antebellum memoirs and Mackintosh cryptically

⁷⁵ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 262.

⁷⁶ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 127.

⁷⁷ Thatcher, *Traits of the Tea Party*, 52; Anderson, "Ebenezer Mackintosh, Stamp Act Rioter and Patriot," 52. In his 1835 biography of George Hewes, Benjamin Thatcher included a list of Tea Party participants from an "aged Bostonian" that listed a "Mr. McIntosh." While Thatcher believed that this McIntosh referenced Peter McIntosh, Peter would have been only fifteen at the time of the Tea Party. In addition, the Mr. McIntosh is listed alongside William Molineux and Paul Revere, suggesting that the individual who provided the list grouped the prominent organizers of the Tea Party together.

claimed in 1810, “It was my chickens that did the job.”⁷⁸ Since Mackintosh had not been publicly involved in crowd actions since 1766, his reappearance suggests that the Sons of Liberty sought his assistance to guarantee both support and discipline within the laboring community.⁷⁹ By relying upon traditions of public protest honed within the town’s lower sort and enlisting laboring leaders to carry out the task, the Boston Tea Party marked a significant strategic shift for the Sons of Liberty. After the laboring community had used the Stamp Act protests as justification to attack the homes of four prominent Bostonians, the Loyal Nine and the Sons of Liberty had largely disavowed using violence to engender political and economic change. Instead, the Sons of Liberty had turned to nonviolent methods of opposition that not only struggled to find success during nonimportation, but also alienated unskilled laborers and disaffected artisans.

In order to regain the trust of the laboring community, the Sons of Liberty altered their rhetoric to align with radical Evangelicalism and expanded the polity at the “Body of the People” to include all white men. In the Boston Tea Party, the Sons of Liberty moved from appealing to the ideology of the town’s laborers to embracing the destruction of property as political protest. The Boston Tea Party echoed the contours of riots instigated by laborers throughout the eighteenth century and served the same purpose of protesting the unfair behavior of political and economic elites. Although the middling Sons of Liberty originally planned the Boston Tea Party, the coordinating efforts fell to workers like Ebenezer Mackintosh who devised an overtly plebeian strategy. By ceding both ideological and organization control to the laboring community, the Sons of Liberty demonstrated how central workers had become in the imperial crisis.

⁷⁸ Anderson, “Ebenezer Mackintosh, Stamp Act Rioter and Patriot,” 53.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

By December 1773, Boston's white laborers had coalesced into an autonomous cultural, economic, and political community. Seeking to restore their idea of a moral economy by assaulting political, social, and economic inequality, the laboring community emerged as an independent constituency that was critical to the success of British opposition. Workers would work with the Sons of Liberty to accomplish their aims, but did so only after middling and upper class Whigs altered their strategies to appeal to laborers. Subsequently, laborers found themselves in a politically active role, shaping the opposition to the Tea Act at the November 5 town meeting, at the "Body of the People" at the Old South Meetinghouse, and in the Boston Tea Party itself. Recognizing that they could not succeed without the lower sort, the Sons of Liberty abandoned their strategy of nonviolent protest and accepted laboring tactics. Bringing North End shipwrights and Ebenezer Mackintosh into the Tea Party planning, the Sons of Liberty required laborers to organize the Tea Party and to ensure the support of those with experience loading and unloading ships. As a result of the Tea Act, Boston's laboring community established itself as a cohesive constituency with the strength to influence the discourse and strategy of the imperial crisis. Even as they peaked in 1773, however, tensions within the laboring community threatened to break it apart. As white laborers drew closer to the Sons of Liberty, they emphasized the racial divide within their community and distanced themselves from free and enslaved African Americans. As the 1770s progressed, this trajectory would set black and white workers on separate paths during and after the American Revolution.

* * *

In the months following the Boston Tea Party, Parliament moved quickly to punish Boston for the destruction of property worth almost nine thousand pounds.⁸⁰ Word of the crowd action reached London on January 19, followed shortly after by Governor Thomas Hutchinson's official report of the event.⁸¹ In contrast to their response to earlier colonial protests, the Prime Minister and Cabinet refused to consider the reasons why colonists opposed the Tea Act and sought immediately to punish the town for its actions. By June 1774, Parliament had passed five acts designed to "mark out Boston, & separate that town from the rest of [the] Delinquents," and demonstrate their sovereignty over the North American colonies.⁸² By the end of 1774, Boston would have to cope with the Boston Port Act, the Massachusetts Government Act, the Administration of Justice Act, the Quartering Act, and the Quebec Act.

Known collectively as the Coercive or Intolerable Acts, the legislation radically altered the economic, political, and judicial structure in Boston and Massachusetts. Beginning on June 1, the Boston Port Act would close Boston harbor to all ocean-going trade except for those coastal vessels bringing food or fuel into the town. The Administration of Justice Act would come into effect on the same day and hindered the ability of the laboring community and the Sons of Liberty to organize and execute crowd actions. The law stipulated that if an individual was indicted for murder or another capital crime "either in the execution of his duty as a magistrate, for the suppression of riots, or in the support of the laws of revenue," they could be tried either in another colony or in Great Britain at the governor or lieutenant governor's discretion. In addition, all

⁸⁰ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 205.

⁸¹ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 227.

⁸² Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 190.

witnesses related to the incident would be bound to appear at these trials and be given financial considerations for their travel.⁸³

In short, the act granted magistrates, soldiers, and other British officials the ability to take extralegal steps, including murder, to prevent a riot or crowd action against customs agents. If an individual took these steps, they would be able to avoid local juries and receive a hearing in a more sympathetic colony or city. The law also served to discourage those who were incapable of leaving Boston for financial reasons, namely laborers, from providing testimony against Loyalist officials.

The Administration of Justice Act received royal assent on the same day as another act that would end the colony's relative autonomy: the Massachusetts Government Act. Slated to begin August 1, 1774, the Massachusetts Government Act revoked Massachusetts's colonial charter and placed the colony more directly under Parliamentary control. The Act also revoked the ability of Boston and other towns to call town meetings, believing that the process had been used to mislead colonists "upon matters of the most general concern, and to pass, dangerous and unwarrantable resolves."⁸⁴ After the Tea Act provided the laboring community an opportunity to participate in the political process as "the Body of the People" at the Old South Meeting-house, the Massachusetts Government Act effectively removed any further opportunity for the laboring community to publicly and peacefully assert their views.

Taken together, the three laws sought to stymie the political power that the oppositional leadership had accumulated in Boston over the course of the imperial crisis. In particular, the acts directly targeted the violent actions undertaken by the laboring

⁸³ Pickering, ed., *The Statutes at Large, from the Magna Charta to the End of the Thirteenth Parliament of Great Britain, Anno 1773*, Vol. 30, 368.

⁸⁴ Pickering, ed., *The Statutes at Large*, 381.

community in opposing the social and economic inequality. Lord North argued that while some innocent Bostonians would be harmed by the acts, the town needed to be punished because it had become “the ringleader of all violence and opposition to the execution of the laws of this country.” Although New York and Philadelphia had been faster to oppose the Tea Act, only Boston’s laboring community had pushed for violent tactics.⁸⁵ As a result, the Coercive Acts sought to prevent crowd actions by all means necessary and restore British authority within the town.

As part of the Intolerable Acts, General Thomas Gage arrived to Boston in May to replace Thomas Hutchinson as governor. By October, Gage had dissolved the colonial legislature, constructed a fort on the Boston Neck to control travel in and out of Boston, and blockaded Boston Harbor.⁸⁶ This last measure, combined with the newly erected fort on the only land route into Boston, allowed the British military to control all trade in and out of the town and deeply rattled the resolve of the laboring community. On the same day General Gage formally closed the harbor, approximately eight hundred tradesmen met to discuss the impending economic crisis. Unlike the 1773 town meeting, in which the town’s artisans expressed their unanimous opposition to the Tea Act and Parliamentary policies, the group “did nothing, being much divided in sentiment.”⁸⁷ Until 1774, the laboring community had acted with the belief that their protests served to oppose unfair economic behavior and would ultimately improve their long-term prospects. Now, facing sanctions and a reinforced British hierarchy, the laboring community began to worry for their economic future and considered recanting their previous positions.

⁸⁵ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 191.

⁸⁶ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 232; *Ibid.*, 261.

⁸⁷ Rowe, *The Diary of John Rowe*, 86.

Colonial officials and the middling and upper class attendees of town meetings echoed this concern and feared that the Coercive Acts would inflict severe hardship on the laboring community. Perhaps cognizant of the social unrest generated by economic hardship and inequality throughout the eighteenth century, the town considered offers from neighboring towns to hire unemployed artisans, initiated construction on a South End wharf to employ laborers, and accepted donations for the working poor.⁸⁸ The town also put laboring women to work spinning and weaving to, in the words of Samuel Adams, “keep the poor from murmuring.”⁸⁹ Despite these efforts to keep the laboring community afloat, Boston’s selectmen lamented in July that “thousands of persons that depended on their dayly labour for their Bread [are] to be reduced to a state of extreme want.” Even as they feared for the economic wellbeing of the laboring community, the selectmen praised the town’s workers for their willingness “to suffer yet more rather than give up their Birth right Priviledges.”⁹⁰ The laboring community suffered the most under the Intolerable Acts, but refused to capitulate to British authority and the economic policies that loyalty would bring.

In addition to the town’s economic struggles, the Boston selectmen believed that “to have a military force introduced among us to insult us in our distress, is a measure that must mark the present administration.”⁹¹ Throughout June and July, four separate regiments arrived in Boston and established camp on Boston Common.⁹² As in 1770, tensions rose almost immediately as Boston’s laboring community encountered British

⁸⁸ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1770 Through 1777*, 175; *Ibid.*, 181.

⁸⁹ Young, “The Women of Boston,” 206.

⁹⁰ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen’s Minutes from 1769 Through April, 1775*, 221-222.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Rowe, *The Diary of John Rowe*, 86-87.

soldiers on an everyday basis. On July 27, merchant John Rowe noted that “a quarrel happened last night between some of the town’s people and some officers of the Army.” Similarly, General Gage called out soldiers to suppress a tumult in September after he prohibited the town’s selectmen from meeting. In an attempt to ensure that encounters between soldiers and laborers would not lead to another King Street Riot, Boston officials and General Gage introduced measures to keep the two groups separate.⁹³ Boston's selectmen prevented soldiers from obtaining special travel privileges and a town committee recommended to increase the number of night watchmen to reduce the possibility of "Bickerings and Disputes."⁹⁴

While oppositional leaders had been behind many of these stringent controls, British officers assented to their imposition due to the increase in deserting soldiers. Not only were ordinary British soldiers tempted to abandon their posts and seek out opportunities in North America, but Boston's laboring community actively encouraged the practice. North End artisans distributed handbills that urged desertion to British soldiers in June 1774 and Samuel Dyer, an unemployed mariner, was caught encouraging desertion at a tavern in July.⁹⁵ According to Dyer's statement, which likely was embellished by the British officers who recorded his deposition, the seaman was part of a group of shipwrights, carpenters, and other North End workers that met at laboring taverns to convince the soldiers they found there to desert from the army. Once a soldier agreed to leave his regiment, he would be sent to an innkeeper, given a horse, and told to flee the town. The workers even accounted for potential economic competition by ensuring that soldiers left Boston entirely rather than moving into laboring

⁹³ *Boston Evening Post*, November 28, 1774.

⁹⁴ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 300.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 301.

neighborhoods. Not only did laborers undermine the British occupation, but they did so in a manner that protected their own social and economic interests. While the intricate plan seems unlikely, two hundred and ten soldiers deserted in ten weeks, suggesting that the laboring efforts to encourage desertion found a welcome audience.⁹⁶

The coordination displayed by Boston's laborers in these efforts reflects how close the community had grown during the imperial crisis. Workers took measures to undermine the British occupation by encouraging desertions and everyday "bickerings and disputes." In addition, when General Gage began fortifying the Boston Neck, laborers sabotaged the army's fortifications, destroyed building materials, and lit fires around the Boston Neck.⁹⁷ Laborers appear to have coordinated and executed this resistance without the guidance or approval of the Sons of Liberty. Growing more tightly knit in the aftermath of the Tea Party, Boston's laboring community continued to attack the British military despite their almost complete control of the town.

Although the laboring community came increasingly together in order to resist British occupation, this came with a significant exception. As with the opposition to the Tea Act, white workers appear to have distanced themselves from African Americans and to have undertaken these efforts without their input or assistance. Growing out of the developments of the imperial crisis, this gradual marginalization of African Americans appears to have been driven by racial and ideological factors. Since the 1760s, white workers had found that the approval of the Sons of Liberty and other Patriot leaders had allowed them to gain social and political legitimacy. Beginning with the 1765 Pope's Day celebration, white workers accepted that pushing African Americans out of their

⁹⁶ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 301.

⁹⁷ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 265.

community allowed them to engage in their protests and crowd demonstrations without condemnation. By the “Body of the People” in 1773, white workers gained enfranchisement in town affairs at the expense of participation by African American workers. Whether a conscious decision or not, white workers found that emphasizing the preexisting racial divisions between black and white workers and aligning themselves with the Sons of Liberty only improved their social position.

As a result, white workers prioritized their desire for a moral economy and the ideology of radical Evangelicalism and ignored the needs and desires of African Americans within their community. Having already harbored racist ideas of African American inferiority throughout the early colonial era, white workers accepted the similarly racist position of the Sons of Liberty and ignored black Bostonians during the imperial crisis. In response to these entrenched racist ideologies, free and enslaved African Americans began to pull away from white workers and used the imperial crisis as an opportunity to advance their own interests. After decades of aligning themselves with white workers, Boston’s African American population took the opportunity to challenge their status as inferior and subordinate members of the laboring community. Free and enslaved African Americans would pursue different strategies, but black workers as a group would navigate the imperial crisis and the American Revolution independently of white laborers.

How African Americans would respond to racism within the laboring community became clear in 1774. In September, white Bostonians grew alarmed when rumors of a potential slave plot circulated throughout the town. According to Abigail Adams, Boston slaves had submitted a formal petition to General Gage "telling him that they would fight

for him provided he would arm them and engage to liberate them if he conquered." Not only was this petition received, but Gage allegedly consulted with two other officers to gauge the feasibility of such a plan.⁹⁸ Although Gage did not accept the offer from Boston's slaves, his consideration reflected a growing willingness by British officials to use slaves against American Patriots.⁹⁹ More than a year before Lord Dunmore would issue his proclamation offering freedom to any slaves or indentured servants willing to fight for the British military, General Gage considered arming slaves in order to drive fear into the minds of Patriots and bring them back into line.¹⁰⁰ The possibility of an alliance between the town's slaves and the occupying British troops, like the rumors of slave revolts in the 1760s, would have driven Boston into a panic and provides a possible explanation for why the plot was not covered in local newspapers. The plan was privately uncovered and dissolved, but the event prompted Abigail Adams to reassert her antislavery views to her husband John. Abigail wrote from the "Boston Garrison," "It allways appeard a most iniquitous Scheme to me--fight outselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."¹⁰¹

While the Adams family never owned slaves, Abigail's position reflected their rank in society and the types of people who owned slaves. As Boston's middling and upper classes grew more affluent and slave prices declined in the mid-eighteenth century, slave owning expanded beyond the wealthiest ranks of colonial society. As Robert Desrochers explains, white Bostonians imported and purchased slaves "to work in their

⁹⁸ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 September 1774, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*, ed. C. James Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2007).

⁹⁹ Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 17

¹⁰⁰ Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 10.

¹⁰¹ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 September 1774, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*, ed. C. James Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2007).

shops and homes, aboard their ships, along their wharves, and on their farms.”¹⁰²

Through her letter to her husband, Abigail Adams drew attention to how middling Bostonians, including those who were now fighting against British authority, were complicit in creating a society with slaves. In her mind, white Bostonians had a responsibility to undo the injustice imposed upon African Americans.

Notably, the alleged slave conspiracy was not the first time a Massachusetts governor had received a petition from a group of African American slaves. Beginning in January 1773, Thomas Hutchinson and later Thomas Gage received five petitions from African Americans seeking the end of slavery in the colony.¹⁰³ The first, written by a slave named Felix, represented “many slaves, living in the Town of Boston, and other Towns in the Province.” Demonstrating both their religious piety and their adherence to the values of the Puritan Ethic, the group of slaves prayed for the Governor to free them from slavery so that they might become productive and contributing members of colonial society.¹⁰⁴ Five months later, Hutchinson received another petition sent in the name of “all those who by divine permission are held in a state of slavery within the bowels of a free country.”¹⁰⁵ After Hutchinson neglected to answer either petition, the group of enslaved African Americans decided that the change in leadership as a result of the Massachusetts Government Act might allow them another opportunity. Less than two weeks after he arrived in Boston, General Gage received a similar petition from “a Grate Number of Blackes of the Province.” The petitioners declared that African American slaves possessed a natural right to their freedom and requested that Gage press for

¹⁰² Desrochers, “Slave-for-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts,” 653.

¹⁰³ Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Woody Holton, *Black Americans in the Revolutionary Era: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 43.

¹⁰⁵ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 55.

gradual emancipation legislation to free all slaves in the colony over the age of twenty-one. One month later, the group submitted the fourth petition that added a request for "some part of the unimproved land, belonging to the province, for a settlement."¹⁰⁶

Utilizing the still nascent rhetoric of natural and human rights, Boston's slaves organized and sought direct assistance from the only Massachusetts official who was largely disinterested in the colony's social and racial hierarchies. The rapid succession of these petitions to the last colonial governors, and the willingness of the town's slaves to fight against Patriot Bostonians, demonstrates that many of Boston's enslaved African Americans viewed the arrival of the British military as an opportunity for social change. The petitions demonstrate that by 1774, the town's slaves had forged a unified group of slaves that felt confident in their ability to advocate for their own social and political interests.

Based on the sparse evidence available, it appears as though Boston's free black population did not participate in this organizational effort. Felix Holbrook, for instance, remained in slavery throughout this period and signed his name to two petitions alongside Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, and Chester Joie. While Sambo Freeman's last name suggests that he may have been emancipated, Freeman referred to himself as a slave in the letter to the colonial legislature.¹⁰⁷ Although it is impossible to determine the number of free African Americans living in Boston, or Massachusetts in general during the 1770s, Boston was likely home to a small free black population.¹⁰⁸ Approximately 989 African Americans lived in Boston during the imperial crisis and free blacks had made

¹⁰⁶ Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1770-1800* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973), 13.

¹⁰⁷ Holton and Holton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 47.

¹⁰⁸ Neither Boston nor colonial officials differentiated between free and enslaved African Americans until 1790. As a result, free African Americans only appear anecdotally in official sources.

themselves known throughout the eighteenth century performing mandatory service for the town, working alongside white laborers, and participating in public celebrations and crowd actions. It is possible that free African Americans believed they would benefit if they aligned themselves with white workers and middling Whigs and in the process begrudgingly accepted the position of Samuel Adams that abolitionism needed to be postponed until the conflict was resolved.¹⁰⁹ Both free and enslaved African Americans had viewed the imperial crisis as an opportunity for social change, but the absence of free blacks from the petitions suggests that the two groups pursued different strategies to accomplish these aims.

By 1774, Boston's enslaved African Americans had made the conscious decision to separate themselves from whites within the laboring community and chart their own social and economic future. After decades of marginalization, harassment, and public violence alleviated only by brief moments of solidarity in crowd actions and public festivals, Boston's slaves broke with the laboring community and elected to take their chances with the British military. According to some observers, "the malicious and imprudent speeches of some among the lower white classes induced [the slaves] to believe that their freedom depended on the successes of the King's troops."¹¹⁰ In addition to racial pressure within the laboring community, Boston's slaves were likely influenced by their knowledge of transatlantic legal developments. In the 1772 English case, *Somerset v. Stewart*, Lord Chief Justice Mansfield effectively ruled slavery to be in conflict with English common law. As James and Lois Horton explain, word of the decision spread quickly throughout the North American colonies in the summer of 1772

¹⁰⁹ Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 121.

¹¹⁰ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 60.

and some runaway slaves even sought passage to Great Britain for a chance at freedom.¹¹¹ Given the clear choice between the Sons of Liberty and white laborers, who had already announced their desire to delay emancipation indefinitely, and British officials bound by *Somerset v. Stewart*, Boston's slaves chose the latter. Although conceptions of racial difference would sharpen in the early republic, the decision by enslaved African Americans to remain loyal to empire made clear the significant racial fissure within the laboring community.

After Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill, black and white Bostonians found themselves surrounded by a colonial army that was ironically sympathetic to their plight. From June 1775 until Gage and the British forces evacuated Boston in March 1776, Boston underwent both an occupation by British troops and a siege by militias that would eventually form the core of the Continental Army. They extended the economic catastrophe created by the Boston Port Act and prevented regular trade from being conducted for almost two years. For workers in desperate need of industry to support themselves, the conditions caused by the combined blockade and siege proved to be especially dire.

Since the arrival of British troops in 1774, many Bostonians had responded to the blockade and occupation by leaving the town entirely. A week before the Revolutionary War began, John Andrews wrote to his brother in Philadelphia that “the streets and Neck [are] lin'd with waggons carrying off the effects of the inhabitants, who are either affraid, mad, crazy, or infatuated.”¹¹² After Lexington and Concord, General Gage began to actively encourage this exodus. From April to July, Gage allowed women and children to

¹¹¹ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 61.

¹¹² Jacqueline Barbara Carr, *After the Siege: A Social History of Boston, 1775-1800* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 19.

leave the town, as well as men who vowed not to take up arms against British troops. The general provided boats and carriages for these refugees and allowed them to take what belongings they could carry with the exception of firearms and metal plate.¹¹³

In July, Gage abruptly reversed this policy at the behest of two hundred Loyalist merchants and artisans. This group feared that if only Loyalists and British soldiers remained within the city limits, Washington and the Continental Army would not hesitate to demolish the town entirely.¹¹⁴ By this time, approximately ten thousand residents had fled Boston and hundreds of Massachusetts Loyalists joined the remaining seven thousand or so inhabitants of the town.¹¹⁵ Those Bostonians who endured the siege, many of whom were laborers without the resources to flee, bore witness to the slow deterioration of North America's third largest port. In a draft letter from May 31, Reverend Andrew Eliot described "Grass growing in the public walks & streets of this once populous & flourishing place - Shops & warehouses shut up - business at an end, every one in anxiety & distress."¹¹⁶ These closed shops and warehouses were not safe from both thieving and military foraging parties. Merchant John Andrews defended his decision to stay in June when he explained that "the Soldiery think they have a license to plunder evry ones house & Store who leaves the town, of which they have given convincing proofs already -- and the wanton destruction of property at the late fire, makes the duty, in my mind, more incumbent upon me."¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Carr, *After the Siege*, 20.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁶ Andrew Eliot to an Unidentified Recipient, 31 May 1775, Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹¹⁷ John Andrews to William Barrell, 1 June 1775, Andrews-Eliot Correspondence, 1715-1814, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

Most wealthy Whigs possessed the resources and connections to leave Boston, but some affluent Bostonians remained in the town to maintain property rights over their slaves. While General Gage assured fleeing Bostonians that private property rights would be protected, in practice the inhabitants found that "those who leave the town, forfeit all the effects they leave behind."¹¹⁸ Boston's slaves took advantage of this unofficial British policy and sought refuge in the town to escape their masters. Fearful that their slaves might runaway and return to the town for their freedom, some wealthy Bostonians responded by remaining in the town and defending their rights as slaveholders.¹¹⁹ Similar to their support of British officials and General Gage, the town's slaves viewed the siege as an opportunity to escape both their masters and their enslavement.

For free African Americans, however, their continued support of the Patriot cause as members of the laboring community drew the ire of the British occupiers. In order to maintain order, and perhaps punish the town's free black population, General Howe attempted to use antiquated colonial laws to force free blacks into working for the British military. In 1707, the Massachusetts legislature had passed "An Act for the Regulating of Free Negroes" that empowered towns to press free African Americans into service "in repairing of the highways, cleansing the streets, or other service for the common benefit of the place."¹²⁰ As racist restrictions on free blacks were narrowly loosened in the mid-eighteenth century, free African Americans were allowed to serve in Massachusetts's militias and by the 1760s, the law was rarely invoked.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ John Andrews to William Barrell, 1 June 1775, Andrews-Eliot Correspondence, 1715-1814, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Massachusetts General Court, *The Charter and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 386.

¹²¹ J. L. Bell, "Caesar Merriam: Black Property Owner, Protester," *Boston 1775* (blog), June 12, 2006, <http://boston1775.blogspot.com/2006/06/caesar-merriam-black-property-owner.html>

In 1775, however, General Howe forced the town's selectmen to invoke the law and mandated that free African Americans clean the streets. With smallpox and other diseases taking their toll on civilians and soldiers alike, the town's free black men were summoned to Faneuil Hall "for the purpose of choosing out of their body a certain number to be employed in cleaning the streets." Even forced to comply by the rule of law, some attendees balked at being forced to assist the British forces. Caesar Merriam, apparently "well-known" to Bostonians, vocally objected to the command and "was committed to prison, and confined till the streets were all cleaned."¹²² Having been able to avoid the degrading labor that the racist statute demanded for several decades, free African Americans resisted being impressed into service. Although the siege presented opportunities for some African American slaves to escape bondage, free African Americans found that the British occupation would do little to improve their social status.

Howe's use of antiquated laws reflected the severe difficulties that poor Bostonians and their British occupiers faced under the siege. The siege inflicted severe hardship on the laboring community and set their experience apart from Loyalists and the more affluent Bostonians who had stayed behind. Not only was the town incapable of maintaining public health, but the siege created critical shortages of food and fuel. In his letter, Andrews noted that less than two months into the siege, he was subsisting primarily on salt provisions, pork, and beans. For the laboring community, conditions were substantially worse. According to the merchant, "we have now & then a carcase offerd for Sale in the market, which formerly we would not have pickd up in the Street,

¹²² *Essex Gazette*, August 24, 1775.

but bad as it is, it readily sells."¹²³ As the siege progressed, food prices soared and the scarcity of meat even led to some soldiers being declared unfit for service.¹²⁴ The lack of food grew so dire that General Gage relaxed the restrictions on ships sailing out of Boston harbor. Within strict regulations, Bostonians were allowed to take daytime excursions in order to catch fish for the benefit of the occupying soldiers and the town. In his explanation for why he helped feed British soldiers for nine weeks of the siege, George Robert Twelves Hewes argued that as a laborer, he was "one among the great number of those who were under the necessity of submitting to them."¹²⁵ Disproportionately struggling under economic collapse and occupation, many of Boston's laborers had no other choice but to cooperate with British authorities in exchange for basic necessities.

As the siege dragged on into the fall of 1775, an additional problem compounded the chronic food shortages. For almost its entire history on the Shawmut Peninsula, Boston had required the importation of firewood for heating during winter months. General Gage and other British officers feared that without a reliable source of food and fuel, famine, disease, and extreme cold would force them to give up their position and evacuate the city. In preparation for the winter, General Howe sent several hundred Bostonians out of the city in July and August and an additional three hundred of the town's laboring poor were evacuated in late November. Over the next two months, General Gage followed up Howe's efforts by sending five hundred more impoverished

¹²³ John Andrews to William Barrell, 1 June 1775, Andrews-Eliot Correspondence, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹²⁴ Carr, *After the Siege*, 25.

¹²⁵ James Hawkes, *A Retrospect of the Boston Tea-Party: With a Memoir of George R.T. Hewes, a Survivor of the Little Band of Patriots Who Drowned the Tea in Boston Harbour in 1773* (New York: S. S. Bliss, 1834), 60.

men, women, and children across the Boston Neck.¹²⁶ By reducing the number of laborers already suffering in the town, the British forces hoped that they would have an easier time rationing supplies.

Despite these efforts, the wintering British forces took drastic measures to acquire wood for cooking and heating. Beginning in September, British soldiers began to demolish old wooden buildings, fences, and abandoned manufactories to burn as fuel and to make room for new defensive fortifications. Approximately one hundred wooden buildings, including the Old North Meeting House, were razed in the fall, and soldiers turned to houses, wharves, ships, and any remaining trees in December.¹²⁷ Due to the strategic placement of the South End, as well as the age and condition of many buildings in the North End, Boston's laborers bore the brunt of this harvesting effort. Already trapped in the town without proper food or fuel, Boston's laboring community bore witness to the destruction of large sections of their neighborhoods.

Finally, Boston's remaining laborers found themselves the perpetual targets of British soldiers. The occupying troops were quick to punish any remaining residents, black or white, who they considered to be suspicious or confrontational. In August 1775, for instance, soldiers imprisoned a Dutch baker for complaining about a foraging party that stole vegetables out of his garden. Unable to afford the dollar fee for his release, he was kicked by each of the prison guards as a form of payment. Similarly, a British provost caned a free African American laborer in October after the laborer was seen pushing his wheelbarrow down the middle of the street instead of on the appropriate

¹²⁶ Carr, *After the Siege*, 29.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

side.¹²⁸ According to the diary of printing apprentice Peter Edes, British authorities targeted the laboring community for years of day-to-day conflict. The son of printer and Loyal Nine member Benjamin Edes, Peter was arrested on June 19 when he fled from the offices of Edes and Gill during a search. After soldiers confiscated a firearm from his father's home that should have been handed over to the occupying forces, Peter Edes was held in prison until the end of October. In his diary, Edes notes that he spent his time in prison with a carpenter, a barber, a painter, a laborer, a boatbuilder, an older slave, white servants, and several female camp followers. While some were accused of stealing from the military or aiding the Continental Army, others were interred for simply speaking back to officers or swimming across the Charles River. Coincidentally, Edes encountered the Dutch baker in August and found that his crime was "Speaking Saucy to an Officer."¹²⁹ The economic collapse, threat of abuse and arrest, chronic lack of food and firewood, and slow destruction of the North and South End neighborhoods, ensured that the siege caused disproportionate hardship among Boston's laboring community.

By March 1776, the logistical and strategic position of the British forces holding Boston proved untenable. After two consecutive days of bombardment, Bostonians and British regulars discovered on March 5 that the Continental Army had relocated to Dorchester Heights and could now easily fire on the British fortifications and their naval vessels. On March 8, General Howe began preparations to evacuate Boston and sent word to the Continental Army. In exchange for a cease-fire, Howe promised not to employ a scorched earth policy during the strategic withdrawal. Upon hearing the plan to abandon Boston, soldiers and civilian Loyalists looted houses, warehouses and stores

¹²⁸ Carr, *After the Siege*, 34-35.

¹²⁹ Peter Edes, diary, 1775, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

with the intent of loading the stolen goods onto the awaiting British ships.¹³⁰ On March 17, the British regiments occupying Boston, along with approximately one thousand black and white Loyalists, sailed out of Boston harbor and headed for Nova Scotia. The siege of Boston was officially over.

* * *

For Boston, the departure of General Howe's forces meant that the town's attention could shift away from conflict and towards recovery and rebuilding. For the remainder of the Revolutionary War, Boston operated largely in an organizational and support role as combat shifted towards the mid-Atlantic and southern states. Bostonians still served in the Continental Army as both soldiers and officers, but the town struggled to find able-bodied men willing to serve. In May 1778, a town committee complained that Bostonians were the victims of unfair draft procedures after the state legislature sent a request for eighty-six additional men. According to the memorial, the draft quota assigned to Boston had been set at one seventh of all able-bodied men. At the time Massachusetts established the quota in January 1777, the siege of Boston had left the town with 2,852 able-bodied white men and "188 [free] Molattoes & Negroes."¹³¹ By 1778, the population of Boston had dropped so that only 1,423 men, black and white, remained in the town.

The inclusion of African Americans in this count reflected a gradual shift over the early years of the Revolutionary War. Prior to 1776, free blacks had served in the local militias that fought at Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, and the siege of Boston. Militias often consisted of skilled and unskilled workers, farmers, and other laboring men

¹³⁰ Carr, *After the Siege*, 37.

¹³¹ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1778 to 1783* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1895), 19.

and the inclusion free blacks reflected the colonial contours of Boston's laboring community. At the behest of southern troops, however, middling and upper class recruiters began barring officers from recruiting African Americans in July 1775. According to Benjamin Quarles, northern officers had already recognized that free blacks served and fought admirably, but "southern troops would not brook an equality with whites."¹³² By February 1776 the Continental Army had excluded both free blacks and slaves from the army besieging Boston, denied enslaved soldiers from reenlisting, and issued an official decree preventing recruiters from enrolling "Negroes, Boys unable to bear Arms nor Old men unfit to endure the Fatigues of the Campaign."¹³³ Massachusetts supported these efforts in 1776 by passing an act preventing "Negroes, Indians, and mulattoes" from joining the militia and by banning non-whites from taking up arms.¹³⁴

In less than a year, Massachusetts reversed this decision in response to the chronic shortage of white men willing to serve in either the state militias or the Continental Army. In 1777, the state legislature quietly allowed African Americans to enlist by altering service exemptions to only include Quakers. In April 1778, the Massachusetts General Court went further and explicitly allowed militia and Continental officers to recruit free and enslaved African Americans.¹³⁵ Not only did this measure fulfill a pressing need, but it may have also been a way of encouraging free blacks to remain loyal to the Patriot cause and to prevent additional enslaved African Americans from fighting for the British. In the wake of Lord Dunmore's proclamation on November 7, 1775, in which the British royal governor of Virginia offered freedom for all indentured servants

¹³² Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 14.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

and slaves willing to fight against the Americans, thousands of slaves throughout the colonies fled to British lines. Some historians estimate that as many as 100,000 slaves took Dunmore's proclamation or the war itself as an opportunity to abscond from their masters.¹³⁶ By enabling free blacks and slaves to once again fight for the Continental Army, the military provided a counterpoint to the convincing argument that the British might treat African Americans better than the Patriots. Unable to find enough white men to reliably fill the state's fifteen regiments, Boston and other towns backed away from excluding African Americans and returned to the policies established during the earliest weeks of the war.

Military service provided a limited sense of equality but proved incapable of bridging the racial divisions that had emerged between black and white Bostonians. After 1765, free African Americans had grown less prevalent in crowd actions when the Sons of Liberty encouraged white laborers to purge African Americans from Pope's Day celebration. People of color had led the mob in the King Street Riot and attended the aborted ceremony against Richard Clarke at the Liberty Tree in 1773, but these instances had grown scarce in comparison to the first half of the eighteenth century. As white laborers grew more self-aware of their political power and emphasized racial differences between black and white Bostonians, they reinforced their conceptions of racial difference and marginalized African Americans even further.

In military service, however, African Americans served alongside white men in the same capacity and often the same rank. African Americans were disproportionately placed in non-combat units, but many of the 5,000 free and enslaved African Americans who served still saw combat. Mixed combat regiments unnerved some white officers,

¹³⁶ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 60.

who believed that black and white soldiers should not have been on equal footing.¹³⁷

Whereas enslaved African Americans in New England often fought in exchange for their freedom, free African Americans appear to have been driven by the same complicated motivations that drove white Bostonians to enter service. As Benjamin Quarles explains, free blacks served the Patriot cause “by a complex of motives—a desire for adventure, a conviction of the justice of America’s cause, a belief in the high-sounding goals of the Revolution, but also the prospect of receiving a bounty.”¹³⁸ Driven by both ideology and financial reward, free African Americans served alongside whites in the Continental Army and constructed a sense of service and pride that they would draw upon in the early republic. Service during the Revolutionary War, however, did not heal the rift between black and white workers. Both groups would derive aspects of their identity from the war, but the shared sacrifice would not be able to overcome racial divisions.

Even after including free and enslaved African Americans in recruiting drives, however, Boston continued to argue that the established quotas placed an unfair burden on the town and especially its laborers. According to their complaint, Bostonians already served well beyond the requirements. Over one thousand Bostonians were already members of the Continental Army and Navy and “such have been the frequent Draughts from the Militia for short Terms of Duty, that almost every Man has served Twice.”¹³⁹ Despite these concerns and the state of their town, the committee proudly asserted that the requested eighty-six men had already been drafted:

... We find the main Difficulty *is* a Consciousness in the Breast of almost every Individual, that we are greatly, *very greatly oppressed in this particular*, tho' we are determined to a man not to be out done by any Town in the State, & we trust it

¹³⁷ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 67.

¹³⁸ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 80.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

will appear, we have more in proportion in actual Service than any other, notwithstanding the many Draughts from this Sea Port, by Men of War & Privateers, without whose Assistance We had long before this been reduced to the most wretched situation.¹⁴⁰

Feeling as though Boston's patriotism had been abused by the state legislature, the committee requested that the town's sacrifice be recognized. After suffering through years of British military occupation, the town argued that "if we then are delinquent, we are ready at all Events to supply the Deficiency, but if we have a Surplus we expect to remain Creditors therefor."¹⁴¹

Notably, the committee neglected to mention that the eighty-six men had accepted only after the enlistment bounties had been supplemented to support the soldiers and their families.¹⁴² Earlier that month, the town had approved adding additional incentives to the existing state bounties to entice men to enlist. Men who agreed to join the Continental Army for nine months would be given sixty pounds, while those who remained with the state militia would receive thirty pounds.¹⁴³ This financial consideration was in addition to a March plan in which "a Quantity of Indian Meal, Rye Meal, Beef, Pork, Rice & Wood" would be given to "the Families of the Non-commissioned Officers & Soldiers in Town, who have inlisted into the Continental Army."¹⁴⁴

For Boston's black and white laborers, the financial bounty and food considerations were compelling reasons to enlist in the Continental Army or state militia. From May 1774 to March 1776, Boston had suffered through an economic blockade, the

¹⁴⁰ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1778 to 1783*, 20.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² It is unclear whether or not Boston provided the same bounties to African Americans and their families. Given that Massachusetts recruiters specifically instructed to only exclude Quakers from their drives, it appears possible that African Americans would have been able to obtain these rewards.

¹⁴³ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1778 to 1783*, 20.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

suspension of town and colonial government, and an eleven months siege that decimated the town's population and destroyed the neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of workers. With little other economic opportunity, Boston's laboring community disproportionately turned to military service. Workers had little other choice as Bostonians struggled to restore their town amidst perpetual shortages of work and supplies. Boston and state officials attempt to put price controls in place for staple goods, but found that unscrupulous merchants were either hoarding these supplies or selling them at inflated prices.¹⁴⁵ In 1776, Massachusetts sent representatives to a convention in Providence, Rhode Island in which the New England states attempted to address issues affecting interstate commerce. On December 31, the convention's president proposed that the states take measures to stabilize the cost of both goods and labor:

This Committee taking into Consideration the unbounded Avarice of many Persons, by daily adding to the new most intollerable exhorbitant Price of every necessary and convenient article of Life, and also *the most extravagant Price of Labour, in general*, which at this Time and Distress unless a speedy and effectual Stop be put thereto will be attended with the most Fatal and Pernicious consequences As it not only Disheartens and Disaffects the Soldiers who have Nobly enter'd into Service, for the Best of Causes, by obliging them to give such unreasonable Prices for those things that are absolutely needful for their very existence that their Pay is not sufficient to Submit them, but is also very Detrimental to the Country in general.¹⁴⁶

Notably, the convention's president, William Bradford of Rhode Island, viewed the rising price of labor to be a more serious problem than rising food prices. Based on the decisions made at the convention, Boston's labor prices for both skilled artisans and unskilled laborers were frozen at three shillings per day, the same average amount paid for labor in 1775. In contrast, wholesale goods prices could rise to 250 percent of their

¹⁴⁵ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1770 Through 1777*, 262.

¹⁴⁶ Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America*, 95.

original value and retailers could add up to an additional twenty percent to this cost.¹⁴⁷ This was considered an improvement over the existing prices in 1776 and 1777, where importers charged six hundred percent above original cost and retailers generated forty to fifty percent profit.¹⁴⁸ By freezing labor rates but only reducing the maximum amount traders and merchants could charge, local and state officials severely curtailed the buying power of ordinary laborers while allowing upper and middling Bostonians to generate substantial profits. After protesting unfair economic policies throughout the colonial era and imperial crisis, workers felt betrayed by the Revolutionary government who had seemingly abandoned their laboring allies in favor of middling and upper class Bostonians.

Alienating workers further, many of Boston's merchants and traders responded to the price controls by closing their shops and waiting for higher prices. Only five months after the law came into effect, Boston instructed its representatives to obtain a full repeal of state law that had codified the convention's recommendations. The town reasoned that the law had been completely ineffective in punishing violators of price controls and as a result of merchant hoarding, supplies had continue to rise in price. In addition, the pay freeze on labor had convinced many workers to abandon their trades and become "pedlars" and "knaves."¹⁴⁹ Bostonians requested that steps be taken to reduce the price of "almost every Article of Life" with the understanding that "*our Trade freed from the*

¹⁴⁷ Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America*, 95.

¹⁴⁸ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 355.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 359.

cruel Shackles, with which it has lately been injudiciously bound, that a plentiful Import will, as assuredly lower the Prices, as a Scarcity has raised them.”¹⁵⁰

After the price controls were finally repealed in October, Bostonians quickly discovered that the restoration of free trade failed to restore economic order. Conditions deteriorated to the point that a town committee asked “the more opulent Inhabitants of the Town” reduce the amount of meat they ate per day to lower the demand and price for the “more indigent.”¹⁵¹ In 1779, Massachusetts tried unsuccessfully to enact another set of regulations intended to control prices, punish unscrupulous merchants, and relieve the suffering of the laboring poor. Despite pleas for moral economic behavior and appeals to the public good, wealthy merchants continued to hoard and sell goods at extravagant prices at the expense of Boston’s laborers.

As Boston struggled to reduce food prices throughout this period, the laboring community grew restive at the obvious economic injustice. After challenging wealthy Loyalists throughout the imperial crisis and often subordinating their own economic interests in the process, Boston’s workers felt betrayed by the policies adopted by the town’s middling and wealthy Patriots. Laborers had previously targeted Loyalist officials and merchants with the understanding that they had supported a hierarchical structure that encouraged economic inequality and personal advancement. Now, it appeared as though Patriot leaders had turned away from the ideology of radical Evangelicalism that they had claimed to embrace in response to the Tea Act and aligned themselves with the town’s wealthy inhabitants.

¹⁵⁰ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1770 Through 1777*, 285.

¹⁵¹ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1778 to 1783*, 9.

Instead of embracing the tenets of a moral economy and challenging unfair economic behavior, Revolutionary leaders appeared to be actively promoting the individualist practices that had drawn the ire of laborers throughout the eighteenth century. In the riots both before and during the imperial crisis, Boston's laboring community had protested the mode of behavior now being displayed by Patriot merchants. Only four years after workers had helped execute the Boston Tea Party as a protest against unfair political and economic practices, laborers found themselves at the mercy of wealthy Boston's seeking to further their own interests. Abigail Adams reported to her husband John that by 1777, the ideological divisions concerning a moral economy had resulted in an atmosphere that included a "Spirit of Avarice" on the one side and a "Contempt of Authority" on the other.¹⁵²

In April 1777, on the second anniversary of the battles at Lexington and Concord, a crowd of approximately five hundred laborers assembled under the leadership of an individual known as "Joyce Jr." Named after the New Model Army officer who captured King Charles I during the English Civil War, Joyce Jr. directed the crowd to round up five unscrupulous Patriot merchants, ported them to the border with Roxbury in a cart, dumped them into the neighboring town, and threatened them with death if they ever returned.¹⁵³ That evening, broadsides signed by Joyce Jr. appeared throughout Boston that encouraged hoarding merchants to begin selling their goods immediately. Observers believed that John Winthrop, a merchant and member of the Committee of Correspondence, had played the role of Joyce Jr., demonstrating that even some

¹⁵² Abigail Adams to John Adams, 20-21 April 1777 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

¹⁵³ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 20 April 1777, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*, ed. C. James Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2007).

Revolutionary officials believed that wealthy Bostonians had gone too far in returning to unfair economic behavior.¹⁵⁴

As the first major crowd action since the arrival of British troops in 1774, the protest, with the apparent endorsement of a respected merchant and politician, encouraged the laboring community to revive public protests to attack political and economic inequality. In July, laborers on three different occasions assembled and seized staple goods from the warehouses and stores of “Tory” merchants. In two of these instances, women initiated the riots while men largely observed the proceedings. On the morning of July 24, about one hundred women met with the “stingy Merchant” Thomas Boylston, placed him in a cart, broke into his warehouse, and divided a hogshead of coffee amongst themselves.¹⁵⁵ Later that evening, William Pynchon of Salem reported that another group of female rioters had assembled in protest at Copp’s Hill in the North End.¹⁵⁶ The North End women joined their male laboring brethren in utilizing violent political traditions to challenge the Patriot support of unscrupulous merchants.

Until the end of the Revolutionary War, men and women within the laboring community continued to stage food riots to mitigate what had become a decade of economic hardship. In September 1777, a crowd repeated the demonstration led by Joyce Jr. and dragged another six men to the Roxbury border. Later in the year, nine hundred residents called their own meeting in the North End and declared that if merchants would not accept paper money for their goods, they would be taken by other means. The

¹⁵⁴ Barbara Clark Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 16.

¹⁵⁵ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 30 July 1777, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*, ed. C. James Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2007).

¹⁵⁶ William Pynchon, *The Diary of William Pynchon of Salem. A Picture of Salem Life, Social and Political, a Century Ago* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1890), 34.

following day, a mob of five hundred appeared before the store of Jonathan Amory to seize a large supply of hoarded sugar. After interceding on Amory's behalf, Boston officials negotiated with representatives from the crowd and agreed on a price at which the sugar would be offered. The crowd then carted the sugar to a local store, where it was weighed, stored, and gradually sold through 1778.¹⁵⁷

The display of unfair economic behavior by Whig merchants and the apathetic response by town officials convinced the laboring community to break with middling and upper class Patriots and clamor for their own interests. These efforts grew beyond public protests as laborers grew frustrated with deteriorating economic conditions within the town. In 1778, laborers went so far as to threaten arson against witnesses, prosecutors, and officials who sought to try the female rioters. On January 2, laborers spread threats against these individuals and at several homes, implicated residents found hot coals placed against their front doors.¹⁵⁸ Later that year, laborers attacked a bakery set up for French troops after it refused to sell bread to ordinary Bostonians. When two French officers intervened, one was wounded and the other killed. Revolutionary and French leaders quietly buried the officer and mutually agreed to blame British agitators for the riot.¹⁵⁹

In both instances, laborers ignored old partnerships with Whig leaders and even strategic military alliances. After more than a decade of working with the middling Sons of Liberty to oppose British authority, Boston's laboring community abandoned their previous partnerships and treated affluent Patriots as if they were Loyalists or foreign aggressors. Throughout the imperial crisis, workers had grown so important to the

¹⁵⁷ Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," 23.

¹⁵⁸ Pynchon, *The Diary of William Pynchon*, 46.

¹⁵⁹ Esther Forbes, *Paul Revere & the World He Lived in* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), 340.

resistance that the Sons of Liberty came to not only adopt laboring rhetoric, but their tactics as well. By 1777, however, inflation, food scarcity, and failed price regulations had convinced male and female workers that Patriot leaders had reversed course and cared little for the needs of their community. Laborers challenged Revolutionary leaders using the same tactics they had honed over the eighteenth century: formal petitions to the political hierarchy, crowd actions, and violent threats to property and individuals. Recognizing that their alliance with the Sons of Liberty had done nothing to advance their belief in a moral economy, Boston's laboring community rejected the new local and state leadership and championed their ideology of radical Evangelicalism. Frustrated that the end of British authority had failed to improve their status, Boston's laboring community broke with middling and upper class Patriots and once again divided the community along economic lines.

Laborers demonstrated this renewed sense of independence during the drafting of the Massachusetts constitution. Like many of the other former colonies, the state began drafting a new constitution in the summer of 1776. Massachusetts struggled with this process due to the fears of many conservative politicians that the Revolution had allowed the state's laborers and artisans too much political power. In addition to the unrest in Boston, crowds in other Massachusetts towns had forced the closure of county courts and advocated for democratic reforms in local governments.¹⁶⁰ In a letter written to Harvard professor John Winthrop, John Adams rejoiced at the possibility of independence but lashed out at the political changes demanded by "the People" of Massachusetts:

Are not these ridiculous projects, prompted, excited, and encouraged by disaffected Persons, in order to divide, dissipate, and distract, the Attention of the People, at a Time, when every Thought Should be employed, and every Sinew

¹⁶⁰ Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 292.

exerted, for the Defence of the Country? Many of the Projects that I have heard of, are not repairing, but pulling down, the Building, when it is on Fire, instead of labouring to extinguish the Flames. The Projects of County Assemblies, Town Registers, and Town Probates of Wills, are founded in narrow, Notions, Sordid Stingyness and profound Ignorance, and tend directly to Barbarism.¹⁶¹

Many members of the state legislature echoed Adams's opposition to the state's democratic fervor. As a result, the body spent more than a year negotiating with Massachusetts towns in an attempt to maintain control over the drafting process. In 1777, the towns and the legislature finally reached a compromise when delegates elected under colonial property standards would draft a constitution that would be submitted to local towns. There, all males "free and twenty-one years of age" would be able to vote on the constitution. In essence, those who attended Boston's town meeting would be able to elect delegates, but 1773's "the Body of the People" would be allowed to ratify the constitution. If Massachusetts voters approved the draft by a two-thirds majority, it would become the state's governing document.¹⁶²

Throughout this negotiation process, Boston's laboring community vehemently objected to the compromise and insisted that the drafting of the constitution be separate from the election of state legislators. When the town meeting was asked to approve the compromise on May 26, the body unanimously rejected the terms. The meeting argued that delegates should "properly come from the people at large" rather than from the pool of existing legislators. Boston's laboring community believed that if the delegation only

¹⁶¹ John Adams to John Winthrop, 23 June 1776, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*, ed. C. James Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2007).

¹⁶² Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 293.

included politicians of property and standing, these men would ignore the interests of laborers in Boston and throughout Massachusetts.¹⁶³

After months of protracted debate, the constitutional convention managed to assemble a first draft. While all men who paid taxes would be eligible to vote, the draft included a bicameral legislature and an executive branch capable of adjourning legislative sessions, creating embargoes against imported goods, appointing militia officers and judges, and vetoing legislative acts. In addition, the constitution prevented Catholics and Quakers to hold political office, maintained the Congregational Church as an established religion, and denied suffrage for free blacks and Native Americans.¹⁶⁴

In early 1778, the legislature reexamined the draft and made several substantial modifications. In exchange for removing the executive branch's veto power, free white men would only be able to vote for candidates for lower offices. White men with estates of more than sixty pounds would be able to vote for upper-house candidates and the governor. In order to prevent laborers, struggling artisans, and other poor men from running for office, lower-house candidates were required to own more than two hundred pounds worth of property and upper-house candidates needed four hundred pounds of personal worth. Finally, the new draft mandated that individuals possess more than one thousand pounds of property, including five hundred pounds of real estate, in order to run for governor. Rather than acknowledging Boston's demand for a constitution representative of the general populace, the revised draft ensured that only the wealthiest men of the state would maintain political power.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1770 Through 1777*, 284.

¹⁶⁴ Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 296.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

When the constitution was put to a vote in the spring of 1778, Boston resoundingly rejected it. At Faneuil Hall, nine hundred and sixty-eight men gathered signaled their displeasure by unanimously rejecting the draft. Similarly, towns like Lexington, Concord, Salem, and Cambridge opposed it unanimously, while in western towns like Worcester, only nine people voted to ratify the draft. Those white men most marginalized by the proposed constitution, western yeoman farmers and laborers in urban areas like Boston or Salem, overwhelmingly rejected the constitution with the understanding that the arduous property requirements ensured that their interests could be easily ignored.¹⁶⁶ These disaffected constituents believed that they had “a right to Such men, to represent them, whether rich or poor, as will feel the distresses of the poor.”¹⁶⁷ In the constitution’s proposed form, laboring demands for a moral economy could be swept aside in favor of policies that benefitted eastern merchants or western land speculators.

The repudiation of the draft constitution led the legislature to wait until February 1779 to try again. In order to engender good will, the General Court decreed that the elected delegates would only serve as framers and that all free adult males would be able to vote in the election.¹⁶⁸ The convention finally met in September and drafted a constitution largely composed by John Adams. Having already privately expressed his misgivings over giving “the People” influence over political policy, Adams’s constitution maintained many of the provisions found in the failed draft and imposed further restrictions on suffrage. Most significantly, Adams increased the property requirement for voting in lower house elections as well as the amount of property required to run for the

¹⁶⁶ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 381.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 300.

upper house and the governorship.¹⁶⁹ In doing so, the constitution imposed property requirements stricter than those found in the colonial era and pushed enfranchisement for white laborers farther out of reach.¹⁷⁰

After a final round of revisions, the convention submitted the constitution to the towns in March 1779. In Boston, inhabitants debated the draft constitution in early 1780 and spent several town meetings crafting amendments to the document. By May, Bostonians had submitted their revisions to the constitution and stated that they would only affirm it if their amendments were addressed.¹⁷¹ Despite the amendments submitted by Boston and other towns, the convention announced in June that a two-thirds majority had approved the document. According to the surviving voting returns, almost half of the towns rejected the constitution outright. Rather than taking into consideration the towns like Boston that had approved the constitution with the requirement that significant revisions be made, the drafting convention counted these votes as outright approvals. This allowed the delegates to manipulate the results and claim that the constitution had been supported by two-thirds of the state.¹⁷² Agreeing with the 1778 Essex County constitutional delegation who argued that those in laboring occupations “cannot have time for, nor the means of furnishing themselves with proper information” to govern, John Adams and the draft delegation ignored laboring objections and effectively forced the constitution into law.¹⁷³ By manipulating the results, the more affluent delegates prevented any chance laborers had to maintain their Revolutionary political gains.

¹⁶⁹ Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 300.

¹⁷⁰ Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 15.

¹⁷¹ *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of the City of Boston Containing Boston Town Records, 1796 to 1813* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1905), 135.

¹⁷² Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 303.

¹⁷³ Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 380.

This loss of political influence would be reflected in the debate surrounding the federal Constitution in 1787 and 1788. After the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787, Massachusetts was tasked with selecting delegates for the state's ratification convention. In a town of 10,000, only 763 men at a town meeting selected Boston's twelve delegates. The enfranchised freeholders chose men that they believed best represented their social and economic interests, including John Hancock, Samuel Adams, merchants William Phillips and Caleb Davis, and judge Thomas Dawes Jr.¹⁷⁴ A total of twelve delegates were selected based on their status within the town and, with the exception of Samuel Adams, none of them had ideological ties to the laboring community. Chosen in December 1787, the convention itself would not meet in Boston until February 1788.

Since the end of the Constitutional Convention, Bostonians and the state at large prepared for ratification by debating the draft document with each other. Given the social and economic status of the delegates, especially those from the eastern coastal towns of Massachusetts, Boston's laboring community remained largely marginalized by this process and were used as props by Federalists and anti-Federalists alike. Both sides agreed that as a result of the Revolutionary War and the inability to trade with Great Britain or its Caribbean holdings, Boston's laboring community found itself in a dire condition. On October 15, the *Boston Gazette* relayed the state of the town, explaining that "the *mechanick* stands idle half his time, or gets nothing for his work but truck—half our *sailors* are out of business—the *labourer* can find no employ."¹⁷⁵ Federalists and

¹⁷⁴ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes from 1787 Through 1798* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1896), 159.

¹⁷⁵ *Boston Gazette*, October 15 1787.

Anti-Federalists understood that the Constitution and a strong central government would affect Boston's laborers but disagreed on the ultimate outcome.

Anti-Federalists argued that the Constitution would bring economic ruin to Boston's laborers and further depress the maritime economy. In the broadside, "Disadvantages of Federalism, Upon the New Plan," the anonymous author "Truth" argued that a centralized government would act to shift national commerce to Philadelphia and leave the Boston Tradesmen "*starving*." "Truth" argued that the loss of *Liberty* created by the strong government would leave ordinary people "*indolent, dissolute, and vicious*," while the officer corps for the standing army and navy would generate "*genteel employment to the idle and extravagant*." In short, the proposed federal Constitution would benefit the nation's already wealthy inhabitants, and leave laborers and tradesmen to fight for their own political and economic survival.¹⁷⁶

Other anti-Federalists believed that the new Constitution ensured that the social and even spatial distance between laborers and representatives would grow too far to ever cross. "Cornelius," writing to the *Hampshire Chronicle*, argued that although laborers were often ineligible to elect representatives to the State Legislature, the annual elections ensured that they would return home and "mix with their neighbours of the lowest rank, see their poverty, and feel their wants."¹⁷⁷ While Cornelius likely exaggerated the frequency of these interactions in urban areas like Boston, he argued that the federal Constitution would keep Congressmen from their homes so that "their chief connections will be with men of the first rank in the United States, who have been bred in affluence at

¹⁷⁶ John P. Kaminski and Gaspare J. Salading, eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, vol. 4, *Ratification of the Constitution by the States: Massachusetts* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1997), 233.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 412.

least, if not in excess of luxury.”¹⁷⁸ Anti-Federalists argued that not only would the Constitution damage Boston’s economy, but it would ensure that the state’s representatives would not hear from those laborers most affected by hardship.

Although “Truth” and “Cornelius” exaggerated the calamity that would befall Boston in order to ensure that their arguments would draw the attention of “all ranks of people,” the accusation that the Constitution was designed to benefit affluent Americans was not that far off the mark.¹⁷⁹ Federalists believed that a strong central government would allow the consolidation of American debt and create a strong economic authority to inspire confidence and investment by domestic and foreign creditors. As Woody Holton explains, “the most obvious benefits would of course flow to the entrepreneurs who received the money—merchants, canal companies, land speculators, and agricultural improvers.”¹⁸⁰ By allowing capital to flow to the nation’s upper classes, Federalists believed that the nation’s wealthy could stimulate the economy to the benefit of all Americans. In Boston, Federalists argued that the economy struggled because there was no strong central government to oppose British trade policies around the Atlantic. The Constitution would allow Americans to counteract these measures, as explained by one Federalist writing to the *Boston Gazette*:

...Our own ships and seamen will be employed in exporting our own produce— This will revive ship-building; and we may soon expect to see our rivers lined, as heretofore, with new ships; this gives employment to carpenters, joiners, blacksmiths, and even to every species of tradesmen.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ . Kaminski and Salading, eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, 412.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁸⁰ Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 231.

¹⁸¹ *Boston Gazette*, October 22, 1787.

Similarly, another anonymous correspondent argued on October 15 that “the *husbandman, the mechanick, the sailor, the labourer, the trader, the merchant, and the man of independent fortune* are all equally concerned in forwarding the American Constitution; for nothing short of a firm efficient continental government can dissipate the gloom that involves every man’s present prospect.”¹⁸² Federalists believed that without ratification, Boston’s laboring community would never again experience economic stability.

This argument proved to be a compelling one for Boston’s delegates as well as its master tradesmen. The twelve affluent delegates, many of them directly connected to Boston’s maritime economy, unanimously approved the Federal Constitution.¹⁸³ After the rest of Massachusetts narrowly ratified the document, becoming the sixth state to do so, Boston’s master artisans organized a “Grand Procession” that included over one thousand men from more than thirty different trades.¹⁸⁴ With the exception of mariners, who appeared to emphasize the central role shipping played in the port’s economy, no unskilled laborers marched in the parade. Middling tradesmen proudly organized the event to demonstrate their approval of the Federalist platform, but women, African Americans, and poorer male workers remained voiceless.

Taken together, the 1780 state constitution and the 1787 federal Constitution represented two significant political moments in which Boston’s laboring community lost influence over community affairs. In 1780, workers objected to the stringent property requirements that prevented them from holding office and directly influencing public

¹⁸² *Boston Gazette*, October 15, 1787.

¹⁸³ List of Yeas and Nays on the Question of Massachusetts Ratifying the Constitution of the United States, Assembled by G.R. Minot, 6 February 1788, Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁸⁴ *Independent Chronicle*, February 14 1788.

policy. In 1787, laborers were caught between Federalists and anti-Federalists who differed over whether the Constitution would be an economic stimulus or disaster. More established tradesmen welcomed the potential influx of capital into Boston, but poorer laborers found themselves left out of the debate. Unable to sway political and decisions as they had during the imperial crisis, the two constitutions limited the power held by Boston's laboring community and helped to further divide workers from the middling and upper classes.

* * *

Although many within Boston's laboring community appeared unhappy with the state and federal constitutions, not all workers viewed them as a defeat. In 1780, for instance, Boston had sought significant revisions to the state constitution but approved the aspects of the document that protected civil and religious liberty.¹⁸⁵ Boston's free male constituents unanimously approved the constitution's preamble and many articles found within the document's Declaration of Rights. The constitution's first article borrowed from the Declaration of Independence and declared:

All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness.¹⁸⁶

This appeal to universal human rights was echoed in the constitution's preamble, which additionally stated that the state's citizens should "take measures necessary for their safety, prosperity, and happiness." Although much of the state's white male population condemned the new constitution, Massachusetts's African American slaves viewed the

¹⁸⁵ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1778 to 1783*, 132.

¹⁸⁶ Ronald M. Peters Jr., *The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780: A Social Compact* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), 196.

constitution as a chance at freedom. As the racial division between black and white workers continued to widen in the wake of the Revolutionary War, African Americans charted their own path and used the constitution to improve their status. In 1781, Elizabeth Freeman of Sheffield and Quock Walker of Worcester County both sued their owners under the assertion that they were free citizens of Massachusetts. In *Brom and Bett v. Ashley*, Freeman and an African American laborer named Brom argued that they should be immediately released from the custody of their master because under the new state constitution, they could not be “the Negro Servants or Servants of...John Ashley during their lives.”¹⁸⁷ The jury in the Court of Common Pleas agreed with this position and ruled that their former masters pay each of them thirty shillings in damages. Although their masters filed an appeal to the state’s Supreme Judicial Court, it was dropped in October when they agreed that the state’s constitution rendered the two former slaves “free and equal.”¹⁸⁸

Freeman’s and Brom’s masters only agreed to drop their appeal based on the verdict in the first of three court cases involving Quock Walker. Unlike Freeman’s and Brom’s straightforward challenge of slavery, Walker’s cases involved his previous master as well as a third party that allegedly encouraged him to claim his freedom. The two cases that were heard in the Court of Common Pleas, *Jennison v. Caldwell* and *Walker v. Jennison*, produced contradictory verdicts of continued enslavement and freedom for Walker and the case was ultimately pushed to the Massachusetts Supreme

¹⁸⁷ Arthur Zilversmit, “Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (October 1, 1968): 621.

¹⁸⁸ Zilversmit, 622.

Judicial Court.¹⁸⁹ In the 1783 case, *Commonwealth v. Jennison*, Chief Justice William Cushing ruled that slavery was “inconsistent with our own conduct & Constitution & there can be no such thing as perpetual servitude of a rational Creature, unless his Liberty is forfeited by Some Criminal Conduct or given up by person Consent or Contract.”¹⁹⁰ As in *Brom and Bett v. Ashley*, the Supreme Judicial Court ruled that the constitution’s Declaration of Rights rendered slavery unconstitutional in the state of Massachusetts.

While the state’s slaves had successfully made use of the otherwise conservative constitution to challenge their enslavement, it remained unclear if *Commonwealth v. Jennison* and *Brom and Bett v. Ashley* served to abolish slavery altogether. Slavery had been declared unconstitutional, but no formal mechanism emerged for state-wide emancipation. It appears as though many masters accepted the ruling, followed the example of Brom’s and Freeman’s masters, and voluntarily dropped all claims of legal ownership. By the end of 1783, approximately thirty slaves in Massachusetts’s history had successfully sued for their freedom in court and slaves consistently brought freedom suits to court throughout the imperial crisis and the Revolutionary War.¹⁹¹ In the wake of the Supreme Judicial Court decision, these cases largely disappeared from the state legal system, which suggests that many masters privately manumitted slaves and avoided court proceedings.

In addition, slave for sale advertisements disappeared from Boston newspapers in the winter of 1781.¹⁹² Coming only months after Elizabeth Freeman’s freedom suit, the

¹⁸⁹ Robert M. Spector, “The Quock Walker Cases (1781-83) -- Slavery, Its Abolition, and Negro Citizenship in Early Massachusetts,” *The Journal of Negro History* 53, no. 1 (January 1, 1968): 13.

¹⁹⁰ William Cushing judicial notebook, 1783, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁹¹ Emily Blanck, “Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts,” *The New England Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 28-31.

¹⁹² Desrochers, “Slave-for-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts,” 664.

end of these postings demonstrates that the state supreme court ruling convinced many masters that slavery had been judicially abolished. African Americans accelerated this process by absconding from their masters to establish themselves as members of the state's growing free black population. According to a 1784 letter written by "Not Adams" to the *Massachusetts Centinel*, Boston had become an African American refuge after "negroes first began to imbibe the ideas that they could not any longer be held as slaves."¹⁹³ Even if masters were reluctant to free their slaves after 1783, African Americans from both the state and "all parts of the continent" used the state's altered legal landscape to their advantage.

Despite the dismantling of slavery as a legally endorsed institution, the state's remaining slave population does not appear to have been immediately emancipated as many would later claim. The supreme court rulings had encouraged masters to manumit their slaves and for slaves to abscond from their masters, but this process was neither uniform nor officially monitored. The 1790 Federal Census, then, in which Massachusetts was recorded as having no slaves, appears to have been a political gesture rather than a demographic reality.

In the aftermath of the 1787 Constitutional Convention, Massachusetts harbored lingering resentment over the three-fifths compromise. As one of the more populous northern states, the compromise diminished the power Massachusetts would hold in the House of Representatives and granted Southern states a distinct representative advantage.¹⁹⁴ In response to the compromise, Massachusetts officials appear to have undertaken a campaign to claim enslaved African Americans as free blacks in the

¹⁹³ *Massachusetts Centinel*, December 18, 1784.

¹⁹⁴ Paul Finkelman. *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 13.

national census. Although a nominal gesture, this move allowed the state to avoid the three-fifths compromise and count remaining slaves as free citizens. According to Jeremy Belknap's 1847 memoir, the state's census takers cajoled the remaining Massachusetts slaveholders into reporting their slaves as free:

When he inquired for *slaves*, most people answered none,—if any one said that he had one, the marshal would ask him whether he meant to be singular, and would tell him that no other person had given in any. The answer then was, “If non are given in, I will not be singular;” and thus the list was completed without any number in the column for slaves.¹⁹⁵

In addition, Belknap's memoir mentions that some impoverished, elderly slaves “had sagacity enough to refuse the offer of freedom, and remained under the master they had served in their youth.”¹⁹⁶ Forcing their masters to take care of them in their old age, these African Americans would have remained slaves and subsequently should have appeared in the 1790 census. In his 1795 account of the census, Belknap stood by his statistical finding that 6,001 free African Americans and Native Americans lived in the state. Belknap stated that these groups were lumped into the legal category of “all other free persons” because no slaves could be found.¹⁹⁷

In Boston, evidence suggests that slavery lingered into the 1780s and 1790s, notwithstanding the 1790 Federal Census. Advertisements seeking slaves as well as runaway notices continued to appear in Boston's newspapers throughout the 1780s. In 1784, for instance, the *Continental Journal* carried an anonymous request for “A Negro Boy, from twelve to sixteen years of age.”¹⁹⁸ In addition, it is possible that enslaved African

¹⁹⁵ Jeremy Belknap, *Life of Jeremy Belknap, D.D.: The Historian of New Hampshire: With Selections from his Correspondence and other writings* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847), 165.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ George Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866), 247.

¹⁹⁸ *Continental Journal*, July 15, 1784.

Americans were recorded as free men in Boston's Taking Books. The Taking Books, a series of yearly tax records designed to assess the value of real estate, recorded all heads of household and counted the number of men over the age of sixteen in each residence.¹⁹⁹ The assessors used a system in which they marked a "1" or more if the house contained male voters over sixteen who could potentially vote, a "0" if heads of household like widows were ineligible to vote, or an "X" if the head of household could not vote due to their taxes being abated or if they were missing. Free African Americans like Boston Ballard, Sipio Johnson, and Robert Nesbitt were each marked with a "1" to signify that by their age and status as heads of household, they were hypothetically eligible to vote. Similarly, the four free black boarders in Ward 10, who were "as poor as the devil," were still recorded as eligible male heads of household.²⁰⁰

Since the assessors for each ward consistently replicated this system, the exceptions raise questions about the legal status of some African Americans. Throughout Boston's wards, several African Americans were recorded as separate heads of household even when they apparently lived under a white Bostonian. In Ward 9, for instance, an African American named Prince was listed as living with Dr. John Warrin. Similarly, assessors recorded a black man named Hannibal living in the home of merchant Daniel Sargent. In addition, while many African American heads of household were listed with surnames, Prince and Hannibal, along with other men like Jack, Peter, Scipio, and Waterford, were not. The contrast in listings between African American households and these men suggest that they were either still slaves in 1790 or had recently been

¹⁹⁹ Jacqueline Barbara Carr-Frobose, "A Cultural History of the Revolutionary Era, 1775-1795", (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1998), 135.

²⁰⁰ Taking Book 1790, Boston Town Records, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

manumitted.²⁰¹ While inconclusive, the Taking Books provide a glimpse into the haphazard process of emancipation in post-Revolutionary Massachusetts.

While it is difficult to fully ascertain the legal status of these African Americans, the indications suggest that not all white Bostonians agreed with the Supreme Judicial Court rulings in *Commonwealth v. Jennison* and *Brom and Bett v. Ashley*. Instead, some white masters clung to slavery and maintained the institution within their homes for as long as possible. Frustrated by the lack of social change, even when the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court had declared all men, black and white, to be born free and equal, many black Bostonians took action to ensure that their social and economic futures would not be determined by racist masters or apathetic officials. In the 1790 Taking Book, many African Americans, including Hartford Brooms, James Cammill, and James Nikols, could not be found at their expected place of residence. Having either temporarily or permanently left Boston to establish their lives elsewhere, these individuals were listed as “gone” by the town assessors.

Through their conflicting interpretations, the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution further complicated any further opportunities for racial solidarity between black and white workers. For white laborers, the 1780 constitution represented a reversal of the political gains made throughout the 1760s and 1770s. Rather than creating a state government that would allow a place for radical Evangelicalism and reflect “the Body of the People,” delegates crafted a republican form of government that largely disenfranchised laborers and poor artisans. Frustrated by their defeat in both the state and federal constitutions, laborers took solace in the racial hierarchy that ensured they

²⁰¹ Taking Book 1790, Boston Town Records, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

remained above African Americans. This status, however, was endangered by the efforts of free and enslaved African Americans. For black Bostonians, the 1780 Massachusetts constitution represented progress and the possibility of escaping their subordinate status. By forcing through the second draft, the affluent delegates had inadvertently granted free African Americans the right to vote and provided the basis for the end of slavery in the state. After assuming that African Americans would remain socially and racially inferior during the imperial crisis and the American Revolution, white workers suddenly found this expectation challenged. The 1780 constitution laid the groundwork for significant divisions between black and white laborers and, ultimately, the fracturing of Boston's laboring community itself.

* * *

By the close of the eighteenth century, Boston and its laboring community were poised to rebuild as a result of the devastation caused by the Boston Port Act and the siege of Boston. Galvanized by economic stagnation, unscrupulous merchants, and distrustful upper and middling politicians, Boston's laboring community withdrew their support from the town's Revolutionary leaders and reasserted their own economic and social viewpoints. Boston's laboring community, now predominantly white, punished wealthy merchants for unfair economic practices and participated directly in the state's constitutional convention. Fearful that too much democracy would create social and political chaos, the state's conservative leaders reversed the political gains made by laborers and artisans during the Revolution and kept them from electing members of their own community as representatives. As the 1780s progressed, laborers found themselves used as nothing more than political props during the federal ratification debates and

subsequently drew further away from middling and upper class Bostonians. Disillusioned by social and economic inequality, Boston's white laborers rejected the political and economic leadership of the new class of politicians and maintained their autonomy as an independent social group.

Ironically, in their attempt to restrict laborers from determining their own political and economic futures, the state's conservative leaders enabled African American men and women to radically challenge their legal status. Having already broken with white laborers during the American Revolution to pursue their own agenda, the state's enslaved African Americans used the new constitution to their own advantage and forced the legal end of slavery. In the subsequent years, newly emancipated African Americans from throughout New England would flock to Boston to join the existing free population and seek new opportunities. With social ties already strained by concepts of racial difference and competing strategies taken during the Revolutionary War, Boston's white laborers would view the influx of African Americans as a "very great disadvantage of many, very many of the poor town inhabitants."²⁰² Between 1770 and 1787, Boston's laboring community peaked in social and political power, only to immediately find itself pushed aside by their more affluent neighbors and fracturing within along racial lines. As black and white laborers sought to determine their own futures in the early republic, economic changes, class divisions, and new conceptions of white supremacy would end the possibility of cooperation between white workers and other groups. Workers would fight to establish themselves in Boston's rapidly changing society and in the process turn against middling artisans, upper class merchants, African Americans, and recently arrived immigrants.

²⁰² *Massachusetts Centinel*, December 18, 1784.

Chapter 4: "To Claim their Birthright as Freemen": Class and Economy in the Early Republic

In 1832, journeyman housewright Seth Luther stood before a crowd in Boston and railed against the exploitation of New England's workers. Printed as *An Address to the Working Men of New England on the State of Education and On the Condition of the Producing Classes in Europe and America*, Luther's speech detailed deplorable conditions in English and American mills and argued for workers to organize against their employers for "those equal rights which were designed by all." Luther argued that by presenting a united front against "monopolists" and "tyrants," workers would be able to "live freemen and die freemen." Concluding with a thunderous call for action, Luther proclaimed, "Let us be determined no longer to be deceived by the cry of those... who *insultingly* term us—the *farmers, the mechanics and laborers*—the LOWER ORDERS, and *exultingly* claim our homage for themselves as the *HIGHER ORDERS*—while the DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE asserts that 'ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL'."¹

After finding a popular reception in Boston and Charlestown, Luther repeated his speech at lecture halls in Cambridgeport, Waltham, and Dorchester, Massachusetts; Portland, Maine; and Dover, New Hampshire. Luther brought together farmers, mechanics, laborers and poor men in Boston, Lowell, and smaller mill towns and declared the need for a combination that would overthrow the emerging economic aristocracy. Luther believed that manufacturers and their allies deeply opposed urban labor organization because the "contagion" of "*ten hour men*" would convince the thousands of mill workers throughout New England to organize.

¹ Seth Luther, *An Address to the Working Men of New England, on the State of Education, and on the Condition of the Producing Classes in Europe and America* (New York: George H. Evans, 1833), 32.

In the decades following the American Revolution, Boston's laboring community experienced a gradual shift in the contours of labor and work. As the close-knit town of the eighteenth century made way for a bustling, anonymous city of the early republic, the relationship between employees and their employers underwent a parallel transformation. The rapid increase in population, the development of stratified upper and middle classes, and the imposition of the bastard artisan system led to a social and economic gap between Boston's laboring population and their employers. Blaming the city's "aristocracy" for their eroding economic position, Boston's white male Protestant workers grew into a coherent constituency that defined itself in opposition to the city's middling and upper classes. Drawing on the rhetoric and ideology of inequality from the early colonial era, white male workers railed against unfair economic behavior and demanded sweeping changes to political and economic practices.

As they challenged their descent into wage labor, Boston's male workers redefined the contours of the laboring community, incorporating ideas of formal political activism and enfranchised citizenship. In doing so, male workers erased the status of working women and emphasized masculinity as a core aspect of labor. By the late 1830s, Boston's white, male, Protestant workers had crafted a laboring identity that appropriated eighteenth century radical Evangelicalism, blamed upper class "aristocrats" for their loss of status, and fractured the city along class lines. This chapter will discuss how Boston's white male workers deepened the city's class divisions in the early republic and focus on the opposition to Boston's political and economic elite. Building on this discussion, chapter five will explore the separation of white workers from African Americans and Irish immigrants over the same time period.

* * *

After the 1783 Peace of Paris formally ended the Revolutionary War, Bostonians turned to restoring their heavily damaged town. For many, this process began simply by returning to Boston after fleeing in the 1770s. Boston's population had collapsed as a result of the Boston Port Act and the siege, falling from 15,500 in 1770 to approximately 2,700. As the British troops departed in 1776 and the war's focus moved into the mid-Atlantic, former residents and new inhabitants returned to the town and the population grew to 10,000 by 1780. Although still lagging behind Philadelphia and New York City, Boston reached 18,000 people in 1790 and could claim almost 25,000 residents in 1800.²

Much of this population growth came not from the development of new industries, but from the reestablishment of Boston's primary economic ventures. As in the early colonial era, Boston relied heavily on maritime trade to restore the town's fortunes. The Revolutionary War and the subsequent inability to trade with British and Caribbean ports caused exports to fall seventy-five percent from colonial levels between 1774 and 1786. In response, merchants spent much of the 1780s and 1790s forging new business partnerships in an attempt to restore former trade levels. By 1790, these efforts paid off as Bostonians celebrated a new trade route in which Boston ships purchased fur from traders in the Pacific Northwest and sold it at Chinese ports. This newly viable commercial route around South America resulted in a boom for Boston's maritime industries and merchants funded new ships and expeditions to meet demand.³ While this growth did not expand shipbuilding's share of the Boston economy beyond what it was in the colonial era, the new trade routes and merchant relationships allowed the percentage

² Carr-Frobose, "A Cultural History of the Revolutionary Era," 143.

³ Carr, *After the Siege*, 162.

of laborers employed in maritime trades to return to pre-war levels. Trade and shipbuilding returned to Boston, but laborers found themselves struggling to simply return to the same economic levels of the previous generation.

Boston's laboring community found more opportunities as the town turned to the task of rebuilding and expanding. During the siege of Boston, British troops had torn down a substantial number of the town's wooden buildings, many of which had been located in the traditionally laboring neighborhoods of the North and South End. In addition, the Revolutionary War forced construction of new buildings and even basic repairs to virtually cease due to the calamitous drop in population, subsequent lack of skilled laborers, and dearth of building materials. In the post-war period, the pent up demand for new buildings fueled the expansion of the town and provided much needed work not only for carpenters, housewrights, and masons, but for unskilled black and white casual laborers as well. Between 1784 and 1794, skilled and unskilled laborers constructed three hundred and fifteen new homes in Boston and encouraged a five percent increase in artisans seeking employment in building trades.⁴

In addition, the 1790s and the early 1800s brought the construction of new public works projects, including the town's new almshouse, workhouse, the Massachusetts State House, and new wharves.⁵ Skilled and unskilled laborers benefitted from the need for repairs on public and private buildings that had been damaged during the Revolutionary Era. Landlord William Donnison, for instance, hired white and African American laborers to shingle roofs, build barns, paint chimneys, and lay new brickwork at his properties throughout Boston. Churches also underwent much needed improvements

⁴ Carr, *After the Siege*, 165.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

throughout this period, including the Old South Church, which had been virtually gutted by British soldiers during the siege. Repairs began almost immediately in 1776 and the extensive work at Brattle Street kept laborers and artisans occupied until the mid-1790s.⁶

Most of this expansion centered on the less developed parts of the Shawmut Peninsula. Since Boston's founding in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, the bulk of residential and commercial development had focused on the North End and the Central District. After the American Revolution, population growth and a desire for less dense and crowded streets led Bostonians to begin developing the South and West Ends. In 1799, for instance, Bostonians described "new houses" and "half finished houses" all over the South End of the town. Similarly, the West End of Boston began its gradual transition in the 1780s from sparsely settled farmland to the neighborhood for genteel Bostonians. After John Hancock and Peter Faneuil built their residences in the West End, several other upper class inhabitants hired architect Charles Bulfinch to construct neoclassical homes to demonstrate their wealth.⁷

As Boston's upper classes slowly began carving out a section of the town for themselves, they increasingly complained about the town's distinctive laboring culture. Boston's wealthy citizens chose to establish their homes in the West and South Ends of Boston rather than take up the North End residences previously owned by Loyalists. As a result, the North End began to show "unquestionable evidence of decay and unpopularity" as it shifted from the densest concentration of laboring neighborhoods to the almost exclusive domain of the laboring population. As middling and upper class Bostonians moved their homes away from the homes and tenements of workers in the

⁶ Carr, *After the Siege*, 167.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

1780s and 1790s, the demographic shift solidified the North End's reputation as the home of the town's workers.

In the West End, the establishment of new genteel estates provided economic opportunities for both working women and African Americans. In the 1790s, upper and middling families began placing advertisements in Boston's newspapers seeking laboring men and women to serve as servants and cooks.⁸ In 1787, for instance, the *Massachusetts Centinel* printed an advertisement seeking "a negro man to serve in a family," and in 1788, included a similar request for "a negro woman who understands cooking."⁹ While many of these advertisements simply sought any individual who could cook or perform domestic work, others specifically requested women with good recommendations or who had only recently arrived from the country.¹⁰ This shift in requirements, as well as the rise of a group of intermediaries who vetted potential servants, suggests that Boston's upper class families were unhappy with the service and demeanor offered by many of the town's laboring women.¹¹ Where possible, Boston's upper class families preferred to hire the more polite and proper servants within the town's laboring population. In 1805, *The Independent Chronicle* marked this shift in perception through a facetious advertisement:

Much Wanted. A NEAT, well behaved Female, to do Kitchen Work in a small family. She may pray and sing Hymns, over the Dish-kettle, instead of absconded Songs and Swearing; may go to Meeting, to hear such Divinity as is preached by *Elias Smith*, and may belong to that Congregation, which the ungodly call a whining one—and who have as much right to hold their meeting 'till midnight, in the third [sort], as Paul had at Troan, in ancient days, which is much more agreeable, than the midnight revels at play-houses.¹²

⁸ *Argus*, September 13, 1791; *Columbian Centinel*, March 21, 1792; *Columbian Centinel*, June 22, 1793; *Constitutional Telegraph*, December 2, 1801;

⁹ *Massachusetts Centinel*, November 10, 1787; *Massachusetts Centinel*, June 25, 1788.

¹⁰ *Independent Chronicle*, June 25, 1807.

¹¹ *Independent Chronicle*, May 27, 1811; *Boston Patriot* December 13, 1809.

¹² *Independent Chronicle*, May 30, 1805.

While the advertisement was likely intended to parody the vexation felt by Boston's genteel employers towards their servants, it reflects the continuing cultural disconnect between Boston's laborers and their upper and middling neighbors. Even as Boston's economy recovered and employers sought laborers to meet growing demand, the town's middling and upper class inhabitants continued to see the laboring community as a distinct and alien segment of Boston's population. Rather than tolerating the town's laboring culture as part of the existing social fabric, Boston's emerging gentility attempted to instill bourgeois values in workers and demanded a more polite level of decorum. Establishing both cultural and spatial distance from the laboring community, affluent Bostonians continued the process that had begun in the Revolutionary era and sought ways to marginalize the laboring community within public life.

Beginning in the 1780s, Boston's master artisans demonstrated their desire to align themselves with the town's genteel citizens. Through public demonstrations that supported the Federalist platform in 1787 and 1789, master tradesmen distanced themselves from unskilled workers and aligned themselves with the economic and cultural politics of the upper classes. In the 1789 procession to welcome George Washington to Boston, for instance, forty-two trades marched in the parade, but the occupations chose their most prominent representatives and marched alongside town officials, physicians, lawyers, and merchants.¹³ Although the celebration was designed to show Washington "the usefulness of the various trades, handicrafts, and arts of the town,"

¹³ Green and Donahue, *Boston's Workers: A Labor History*, 18.

the parade granted master craftsmen the opportunity to pull away from the laboring community and establishing themselves among the middling sort.¹⁴

As Boston's master artisans announced their intention of aligning themselves with the town's genteel citizens, they emphasized the social and economic distance between themselves and laborers. According to one contemporary, "the prevailing distinction or division of the inhabitants of late seems to have been into the principal people or better sort and the mob or low folks."¹⁵ Masters could still suffer economic catastrophe and return to journeymen status, but culturally they viewed themselves as above the laboring community. As Boston moved further into the early republic era, masters would increasingly sever their paternal obligations to their journeymen and apprentices. Like their counterparts in New York, Philadelphia, and other northern urban centers, masters increasingly saw themselves as employers rather than as mentors within the craft system.

The social distance between laborers and their employers that emerged in the early Republic allowed middling and upper class Bostonians to impose economic changes without concern for personal connections or cultural commonalities. Although the post-war decades signified a recovery for Boston's financial fortunes, it did not guarantee that laborers would find prosperity and social improvement. As Seth Rockman explains in his study of Baltimore, "in the decades following the American Revolution, opportunities for property ownership shrank, wage rates remained static, and many families experienced periodic privation. For many young men and women, setting out for the city appeared more promising than staying behind."¹⁶ In New England, rural workers

¹⁴ *Massachusetts Centinel*, October 17, 1789.

¹⁵ Gary Kornblin, "From Artisans to Businessmen: Master Mechanics in New England, 1789-1850" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1983), 68.

¹⁶ Seth Rockman, *Scraping By*, 54.

flocked from small farms to Boston and created an urban environment in which greater numbers of skilled and unskilled laborers competed within an economy that had only begun to expand beyond its eighteenth century contours. Once in Boston, existing workers and new arrivals struggled to maintain their share of a limited amount of resources and found that the town's economic growth largely remained out of reach for the laboring population.

As Boston moved beyond the American Revolution, merchants embraced similar commercial ventures to those that brought it to prominence in the early colonial era. For workers, this reliance upon the Atlantic economy ensured that the cycles of booms and depressions that characterized the eighteenth century would continue into the early Republic. At first, the steady growth of the 1780s and 1790s lead some Bostonians to believe that the laboring community would benefit from the post-war economy. According to one frustrated Bostonian, "fellows who would have cleaned my shoes five years ago, have amassed fortunes, and are riding in chariots."¹⁷ While an exaggeration, this belief that the economic boom had brought wealth to all of the town's inhabitants encouraged further migration to Boston and swelled the ranks of the laboring community.

As had often happened in the early colonial era, this prosperity proved to be short lived. The Panic of 1797, triggered by financial decisions within the Bank of England, the attacks on American ships in the Caribbean during the Quasi-War, and yellow fever epidemics in ports like Philadelphia and Baltimore caused shockwaves within the Atlantic economy and brought to Boston another round of commercial stagnation.¹⁸ The recession dragged on until roughly 1801 and forced urban tradesmen and unskilled

¹⁷ Carr, *After the Siege*, 156.

¹⁸ Richard S. Chew, "Certain Victims of an International Contagion: The Panic of 1797 and the Hard Times of the Late 1790s in Baltimore," *Journal of the Early Republic* 25, no. 4 (Winter, 2005): 565-613.

laborers throughout the United States into a lean period with very little employment opportunity.¹⁹ Even as Boston moved into the nineteenth century, the effects of the recession lingered into a sluggish recovery and ensured that Boston's laboring community would be wary of further economic upheaval.

Only ten years after the recession began, Boston's laboring community found reason to be concerned with the town's economic progress. In 1807, national foreign policy decisions stalled Boston's slow upward climb and plunged the town into another prolonged economic slump. In December of that year, Thomas Jefferson signed the Embargo Act in response to repeated violations of American neutrality by the British and French during the Napoleonic Wars. Prior to the Act, Boston had vocally supported any action taken by the United States government to protect American sailors and merchant ships.²⁰ By July 1808, however, Bostonians began to plead with Congress to suspend the embargo. According to the petition drawn up by a Boston town meeting, the embargo disproportionately hurt Bostonians, as "they necessarily owe much of their prosperity...to their own enterprize & Industry on the Ocean."²¹ In January 1809, the desperate need to restore Boston's connection to the Atlantic World pushed the town to declare the Embargo Act unconstitutional and announce that it would no longer "voluntarily aid or assist in the execution of the Act."²² The town argued that these steps had to be taken because the Act had inspired opposition among Bostonians, "whom it may be affirmed *that their home is on the Ocean*, and with respect to *all* of whom, it is certain, that their

¹⁹ Richard S. Chew, "Certain Victims of an International Contagion," 568.

²⁰ *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston Containing Boston Town Records, 1796 to 1813* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1905), 222.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

²² *Ibid.*, 245.

prosperity...is absolutely dependent on Commerce.”²³ With the town’s economy still heavily reliant on international commerce, laboring Bostonians came to believe that Republican economic policies under Jefferson had brought harm upon their financial well-being.

For skilled workers, the economic pain brought on by the Panic of 1797 and the Embargo Act was compounded by fundamental shifts within the artisan craft system. At the turn of the nineteenth century, employers had begun taking measures that would push skilled workers closer to the status of unskilled laborers and recently arrived migrants. In the 1790s, northern masters began dividing aspects of craft labor through outwork and increased specialization. Charged with only partial tasks rather than complete projects, journeymen in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore found themselves without the skills and opportunities necessary to open their own shops as masters.²⁴ As Boston’s population swelled and laborers jostled for employment, masters and their wealthy patrons forced this new system onto laborers who could not rely on skill or job security to resist the changes. In building trades, for instance, the post-war construction boom encouraged the degradation of work even as the town’s expansion fueled new employment. In order to quickly put up large buildings, wealthy investors favored masters who treated carpenters and other artisans as daily wage earners or subcontractors.²⁵ This relationship allowed masters to hire laborers for specific parts of a job rather than paying a single journeyman to complete an entire task. In addition, the

²³ *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston Containing Boston Town Records, 1796 to 1813*, 241.

²⁴ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 33.

²⁵ Lisa B. Lubow, “From Carpenter to Capitalist: The Business of Building in Postrevolutionary Boston,” in *Entrepreneurs: The Boston Business Community, 1700-1850*, ed. Conrad Edick Wright and Katheryn P. Viens (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 200.

new system allowed masters to hire or fire workers based on the amount of work needed for that day. Laborers flocked to the West and South Ends to take advantage of the construction boom, but found themselves forced into day labor regardless of skills or personal relations.²⁶

The bastardization of the craft system, as Sean Wilentz has termed this development, occurred in Boston despite a smaller labor pool and lack of mechanization compared to New York City.²⁷ Wilentz argues that over the course of the antebellum era, New York crafts embraced the division of labor within workshops and piecework outside of them in order to maximize output and reduce costs.²⁸ Primed as the “premier site for producing finished consumer goods,” New York City masters adopted the bastard artisan system in order to meet demand for the growing national and international market. In contrast, Boston, with the exception of some trades including shoemaking and later iron founding, produced goods largely for local and regional markets.²⁹ Boston’s economy remained focused on mercantile and commercial endeavors during the antebellum era and yet transitioned towards a similar bastard artisan system. The divisions of labor and outwork seen in construction also developed in tailoring, shoemaking, blacksmithing, and baking.³⁰ After the devastation of the Revolutionary War, it appears as though masters and wealthy capitalists drove the collapse of the traditional craft system in order to rapidly restore and expand Boston’s economy. As employers focused on returning Boston to prominence as an Atlantic port rather than as a mechanizing industrial center, skilled laborers found themselves forced into the bastard artisan system. Unable to rely upon

²⁶ Lubow, “From Carpenter to Capitalist,” 200.

²⁷ Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 113.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Kornblith, “From Artisans to Businessmen,” 210-217.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

their skills for opportunities or social advancement, laborers readily accepted the employment available to them within the competitive marketplace and lost the job security and integrity that had characterized the early colonial era.

As journeymen artisans found it more and more difficult to become masters, the distinctions between skilled and unskilled laborers began to blur. Whereas Boston's early colonial laboring community had only included those poor artisans who struggled to establish their own independence, the post-war laboring community increasingly came to include all journeymen artisans. In the decades following the American Revolution, Boston's laborers of all occupations and backgrounds found themselves working for daily wages with little opportunity for upward social mobility. Unable to rely on the personal obligations and relationships that had characterized the craft system in the early colonial era, workers fought for economic survival in a competitive and growing labor market.

These developments paralleled those occurring within other American cities, as early entrepreneurs sought to take advantage of the favorable commercial system created in the wake of the Federal Constitution to expand their investments and grow their businesses. In order to maximize growth, employers sought to expand the labor pool as fast and as quickly as possible.³¹ As long as Boston's workers adhered to the Anglo-American cultural belief that workers "deliver up their labor to the superiors who might best utilize it," employers expected laborers to compete with one another and drive down their own standard of living.³² By creating a labor exchange in which the number of laborers outpaced the number of available steady jobs, employers ensured that Boston's growth would be fueled by degrading the status of workers.

³¹ Rockman, *Scraping By*, 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 43.

* * *

In the early nineteenth century, Boston's laboring population also found itself largely at the mercy of the town's political elites. Since the ratification of the state constitution of 1780, upper class merchants and politicians had taken measures to undercut the influence of Boston's laboring community and reverse the gains it had accumulated during the imperial crisis. The betrayal felt by the laboring community as a result of this process continued in the early republic as Boston's political leaders routinely sought ways to circumvent laboring interests. Based on the surviving evidence, Boston's laboring community had initially been torn between the anti-Federalists and the Federalists when the proposed Constitution was released to the public. Although Federalists believed the Constitution would bring an era of economic prosperity to the United States, laborers feared that a strong central government and central capital would pull commerce away from Boston and drive the town into decline. By February 1788, however, workers had come to support the Constitution, especially after it became clear that the document would be amended to include the Bill of Rights.³³ Boston's laboring community had largely been marginalized during the ratification process, but after two decades of economic hardship, the Federalist promise of investment and growth proved to be a compelling one.

This did not mean, however, that Boston's laboring community had transformed into devout Federalists. After losing political influence during the ratification debates for the state and federal constitutions, the laboring community remained unwilling to unquestioningly follow Boston's upper class leaders. As a result, the town's politicians, and especially wealthy Federalists, found themselves contending with the laboring

³³ Holton, *Unruly Americans*, 253.

community as they attempted to push their agenda. In 1803, for instance, Boston's laboring community, this time including independent tradesmen, fought against a proposed plan to strengthen the laws regarding wooden buildings. The Massachusetts General Court had revised and enacted a new law concerning wooden buildings in 1798 and intended to expand the law in 1803 in order to better protect Boston from fire.³⁴ Under the new regulations, "all buildings exceeding ten feet in height shall be built wholly of brick or stone except such parts as may be necessary for doors or windows, and covered with Slate Tile or other non-combustible composition."³⁵

After the recommendations for the new bill were accepted at a Boston town meeting held in Faneuil Hall on January 21, Bostonians apparently pressed to have the town review the terms again only ten days later. The turnout on January 31 was so large that, after arriving at Faneuil Hall, the meeting was relocated to the Old South Church to accommodate all those who wished to attend. After a "large debate," the assembled crowd voted to keep the terms as they currently read, but added an amendment that would allow any wooden buildings already under construction to be exempted from the law.³⁶ The Massachusetts General Court eventually passed the law with this amendment included and mandated that the wooden buildings be completed before June 1, 1803.³⁷

Although the town records describe very little of the two town meetings, the dynamics present suggest that a group of tradesmen and laborers with the ability to vote demanded the second meeting to influence a law that would directly affect their

³⁴ Frederick Huntley Madison and Thomas Tracy Bouve, *The Statute Law of Municipal Corporations in Massachusetts, with Historical Introductions Tracing the Development of the Law from Its Beginning in Every Department of Municipal Government* (Albany: Matthew Bender & Company, 1917), 732.

³⁵ *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston Containing Boston Town Records, 1796 to 1813* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1905), 138.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁷ Madison and Bouve, *The Statute Law of Municipal Corporations in Massachusetts*, 732.

livelihoods. For the skilled and unskilled laborers who had benefitted from the construction boom after the American Revolution, the new restrictions on wooden buildings limited the work available to housewrights, carpenters, and other woodworking tradesmen. In addition, by prohibiting wooden buildings over ten feet tall, the law restricted the possibility of laborers with limited means to build homes of their own. Upper class Bostonians, and especially the town's leading Federalists, possessed the means to build grand brick and stone structures in the West and South Ends that would not be affected by the law. As a result, middling and upper class Bostonians readily endorsed a law that would improve fire safety by placing the burden on the laboring community. Laborers and tradesmen agreed that the town needed to prevent fires, but desired a law that would not put additional limitations on their economic mobility.³⁸ Even as their political influence waned in the early republic, Boston's laboring community sought to maintain an active presence within the public sphere and ensure that their needs were considered. As Boston's upper class politicians and the laboring community drifted further and further apart, the limited economic growth and property ownership experienced by unskilled workers, journeymen, and struggling tradesmen would cause the laboring community to return to the wooden buildings law as a symbol of their marginalization within the public sphere.

The tradesmen who extracted the small concession from the Boston town meeting did so despite significant social and political obstacles. In the years following the ratification of the Federal Constitution, Federalists took measures to ensure their political and economic influence over the town. In the early Republic, Boston became known as a

³⁸ *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston Containing Boston Town Records, 1796 to 1813*, 138

Federalist stronghold. According to Ronald Formisano, Suffolk and Essex County formed the fundamental core of Federalist support from 1800 to 1824 and Boston “stayed Federal to the end, though weakly so after the state had gone Republican.”³⁹ Boston Federalists relied upon their unified leadership in order to maintain control and used their social and economic influence, as well as intimidation, to generate a “sense of dependence” in middling and laboring voters.⁴⁰

During the Embargo, for instance, Federalists argued that Republican control over the national economy had been directly responsible for Boston’s dire economic state. Federalists constantly reminded laboring Bostonians that the Republican embargo had caused irreparable harm to fishermen, farmers, and laborers. Repeating this message in the press, Federalists encouraged laborers to associate Federalist control over local and national politics with economic growth. According to the Democratic *Columbian Detector*, Federalists also acted to compound laboring hardship in order to encourage workers to vote Federalist in upcoming elections. The *Detector* presented a dramatized situation in which a Federalist denied a North End laborer the right to vote because “the Embargo bore hard on you and many other North End Mechanics, concluded, as a relief, not to tax you this season.”⁴¹ Without an assessed tax, laborers could be disqualified from voting because they could not be verified as freeholders or inhabitants of the town. Not only did the Embargo Act of 1807 hurt the economic prospects of Boston’s laborers, but Federalists used it place additional pressure on laborers at the polls.

³⁹ Ronald Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 150.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴¹ *Columbian Detector*, April 28, 1809.

While the *Detector's* scenario had been dramatized to prove a point to its readers, the exchange reflected the methods that Federalists had used to appeal to laborers for several years. During the ratification debates surrounding the federal Constitution, Federalists argued that the new government (and their guidance) would bring about an era of economic prosperity. During the Embargo of 1807, Federalists returned to this rhetoric to assert that Republicans could not be trusted to serve the economic interests of the laboring community. Federalists took advantage of the economic hardship felt by laborers and disaffected tradesmen and even took illegal actions to gain additional political leverage. As Levi Lincoln, a former Democratic-Republican governor, argued in 1805, Federalists used their economic clout to seize political power and deprive laborers of choice:

By *force*, I mean an intolerant and oppressive violence towards laborers, tenants, mechanics, debtors, and other dependents: every species of influence, on every description of persons, has been practiced, and with a shameless effrontery. Individuals have been threatened, with a deprivation of employment, and an instant exaction of debt to the last farthing as a Consequence of withholding a federal vote, or rather of not giving one.⁴²

According to Republicans, Federalists used their status as employers, merchants, and charitable benefactors to coerce laborers into supporting political and economic policies that benefitted upper class Bostonians. By embarrassing local Republicans with the Embargo of 1807 and coercing their employees, Federalists attempted to eliminate any autonomy among workers and create a loyal constituency of laboring Federalists.

As a Democratic-Republican policy that weakened the financial stability of laborers, the Embargo Act of 1807 ensured that workers would continue to throw their support behind the town's Federalists. In doing so, laborers inadvertently allowed the

⁴² Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture*, 137.

amalgamation of Boston's political and economic elites and endorsed the economic policies of Federalist merchants. This fusion of commercial and political interests created an environment in which "government service advanced class power as well as class honor."⁴³ Despite fighting against an aristocratic interest in the imperial crisis and the American Revolution, laborers frustrated by the economic policies undertaken during the Embargo Act unintentionally helped create a similar social structure.

But after several years in which Federalists forced laborers to support their economic and political agenda, male laborers returned to voicing their displeasure with the reestablished social hierarchy. In its portrayal of a North End Mechanic, the *Columbian Detector* hinted that Boston's white male workers had begun to develop a political and economic identity in opposition to what Federalists would prefer. Rather than following Federalist leadership without question, Boston's white laborers attempted to restore the social structure of the Revolutionary era that valued their economic contributions to the community and patriotism:

I was born, educated, and served my time in this town—have paid taxes twenty-five years—am father of nine children, three of which are capable of fighting the battles of their country, as their father and grandfather have before them—besides, my name has been on the list of voters every year since a list has been required, and now for what am I to be disfranchised?⁴⁴

Although the mechanic in the article was an invention of the Democratic *Detector*, the newspaper gave voice to a growing sentiment within the town's laboring population.

Workers connected their economic and political struggles to those who opposed the British hierarchy during the imperial crisis and believed that patriotism meant more than personal wealth.

⁴³ Matthew H. Crocker, *The Magic of the Many: Josiah Quincy and the Rise of Mass Politics in Boston, 1800-1830* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 7.

⁴⁴ *Columbian Detector*, April 28, 1809.

As the town's Federalists maintained their control over Boston into the 1810s, they recognized the resentment growing within the laboring community and began a concerted effort to attract working votes with rewards rather than coercion. In order to foster a new generation of Federalist voters, the party established the Washington Benevolent Society in 1812. Ostensibly a charitable association, the WBS acted to expand the power of the Federalist Party by reaching out to the laboring population. The Society's constitution declared that any individual unable to afford the two-dollar initiation fee would be given free membership. As a relatively inexpensive, or even free entrance into formal politics, the Boston chapter of the WBS rapidly attracted workers into its ranks, including forty-four laborers, sixty-eight clerks, 296 shopkeepers, and 309 mechanics.⁴⁵ The organization spent a substantial amount of money on propaganda and public demonstrations to attract new members, leading Republicans to argue that the WBS did little more than pay for "*banners, votes, ribbands, and other vapid trumpery, to make up a show.*"⁴⁶

According to the Democratic *Boston Patriot*, the pageantry of the WBS served as a bribe that allowed Federalists to attract "the most needy and mean spirited part of the people." Associating the WBS with the disorderly rioters of the eighteenth century laboring community, the *Patriot* believed that Federalists had tricked workers into accepting their degraded status:

It is aspiring aristocracy in its most alluring guise; it is *imposture* of the most dangerous kind. It tends to the creating of *pauperism*, to the forming of a class in the community, who have no interest in supporting the rights and liberties of the nation, and who are to be bought and sold like cattle. *These societies out to be resolutely attacked and exposed.*⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁷ *Boston Patriot*, July 15, 1815.

Republicans argued that in exchange for festivals and parades, laborers enabled Federalists to push their economic and political agenda without substantive opposition. More often than not, this agenda reflected the “*private motives*” of Boston’s merchants rather than the wants and needs of the greater Boston population.⁴⁸

While Republicans argued that the WBS did little more than allow Federalists to co-opt the political energies of the laboring community, the Washington Benevolent Society performed two important functions in the eyes of workers. First, laborers joined the WBS and participated in public celebrations because they reminded the general population that workers played an important role within the town’s political system. The parades echoed the public demonstrations of the early colonial era and encouraged laborers to participate in politics through their social and cultural traditions. After the ratification of the state and federal constitutions, Massachusetts officials and their upper class allies had cracked down on crowd actions, declaring them antithetical to republicanism. In accordance with the republican ideal of personal representation, middle and upper class Bostonians argued that rioting held no societal value when laborers could vote or bring their complaints before the court system.⁴⁹ Boston’s laboring community did not abandon rioting as a method of making their political and economic grievances known, but nineteenth century workers expanded their tactics to include electioneering and formal organizations. Through the WBS, Boston’s laboring community could join a legally recognized association, modify the rituals of early colonial crowd actions, and inject them into political pageantry. Bridging the divide between crowd actions and

⁴⁸ Andrew Cayton, “The Fragmentation of A Great Family: The Panic of 1819 and the Rise of the Middling Interest in Boston, 1818-1822,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 2, no. 2 (July, 1982): 144.

⁴⁹ Pauline Maier, “Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (January, 1970): 34.

formal politicking, the Washington Benevolent Society enabled laborers to legitimize their preferred form of demonstration and highlight their importance as a political constituency.

Secondly, the WBS encouraged Boston's white workers to bring the personal connections fostered within the laboring community into the public sphere. Only a year after its founding, Boston's chapter of the Washington Benevolent Society boasted 1,500 members and became a model for Federalists in other New England towns.⁵⁰ Although the organization helped upper class Federalists to solidify their hold over the town, its rapid rise reflects how Boston's white male workers placed value in the participation endorsed by the WBS and encouraged other laborers to become members. For the first time since the imperial crisis, Boston's laboring community was directly encouraged to participate in the town's political process. The Washington Benevolent society fostered a sense of citizenship within Boston's laboring community and encouraged them to understand that their traditions of public celebration and mobilization could contribute to Boston's political future.

While the Washington Benevolent Society encouraged male laborers to participate in formal politics for the benefit of the town's Federalists, this coordination would be short lived. By the end of 1814, laborers had abandoned the WBS as quickly as they had joined it, leaving the organization in the hands of young upper class men.⁵¹ Boston's laboring community had viewed the society as way to voice their opinions during the War of 1812 and accepted the level of respectability that the WBS had afforded them. With the war over, Boston's laborers returned their focus to Boston's

⁵⁰ Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, 16.

⁵¹ Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture*, 117.

economy and the political decisions that had seemingly encouraged their eroding financial status.

Going forward, white laborers would continue to expand their tactics as they maintained their engagement with the public sphere. After the early colonial era, in which the vast majority of laborers had only engaged with local politics through crowd actions, workers in the early Republic used their newfound citizenship in the new nation to more directly participate in town affairs. No longer restricted to informally and illegally influencing social, economic, and political policies, workers expanded their definition of politics beyond crowd actions to include petitions, electioneering, formal organizations, and activism through meetings and strikes. White laborers would continue to riot as they had in the eighteenth century, but workers took advantage of the rights afforded to them in the wake of the American Revolution to challenge the town's political and economic leaders through additional means.

* * *

Throughout the early republican era, Federalist economic leaders promoted shipping ventures over investments in domestic manufacture. While Boston's dearth of manufactories was partially due to the lack of fast flowing rivers and space required for manufacturing, wealthy merchants also used their outsized influence to maintain the town's emphasis on shipping. In 1817, for instance, the *Boston Commercial Gazette* addressed the perception that manufactories and merchants were largely antagonistic industries. The *Gazette* argued that because the country's "commercial operations" had been so successful, Americans had neglected to invest in either agriculture or manufactories. The disproportionate success found by upper class merchants in Boston

and other ports had convinced Americans “to get situations for their sons in stores and counting rooms” at the expense of other American industries.⁵²

By privileging commerce and trade over agriculture and manufacturing, Boston’s economic elites limited the opportunities for laborers that would have been present in a more diversified economy. Especially as the bastard artisan system continued to erode the status of skilled journeymen and transform them into day laborers, workers felt that Federalists had instituted policies that privileged themselves and upper class merchants over the needs of the town. As workers began to withdraw their support from Federalist leadership over the 1810s, the Panic of 1819 would transform a slow exodus into an outright revolt. After the War of 1812, American cotton prices almost doubled as British textile factories increased production to meet pent up demand caused by the conflict. As international demand for American cotton boomed, Boston and other northern ports quadrupled their shipping rates, allowing urban merchants to reap the benefits of Southern agriculture.⁵³ By 1818, however, English merchants grew tired of the high prices and shifted their orders to East Indian cotton. As the American cotton prices contracted to pre-boom levels, shipping demand plummeted and dragged Boston's and the nation's economy into depression.

In the following years, businesses failed, the price of goods plummeted, and investment capital evaporated. Years before the full extent of the depression would be realized, Governor James Brooks lamented that the Panic had made it so that "the industrious mechanic may not be able to earn enough money by his labor to supply the

⁵² *Boston Commercial Gazette*, January 30, 1817.

⁵³ Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, 3.

natural wants" of himself or his family.⁵⁴ Between 1820 and 1822, 3,500 Bostonians, largely laborers and struggling artisans, found themselves thrown in prison for debts they had no hope of repaying. After arguing for decades that they were the only reliable stewards of the Boston economy, Federalists recognized that they would be blamed for the Panic of 1819. They predicted that the Panic would draw attention to economic stratification and create political debates with "more reference to the different classes of citizens...than to abstract theories, or to foreign impressions."⁵⁵

As Federalists feared, the Panic of 1819 convinced laborers to use their prior experience with political activism against them. In 1820, the publishers Clark and Brown released the first issue of the *Debtor's Journal*, a short-lived newspaper designed "to subdue aristocracy and promote our freedom and happiness, as Americans."⁵⁶ The *Journal* repeatedly attacked Federalists for ignoring the rising number of laborers, artisans, and small shop owners imprisoned for debt and organized petitions to amend state laws.⁵⁷ Echoing the laboring rhetoric of the early colonial era, the *Debtor's Journal* believed that the root cause of debt imprisonment was the rising level of inequality and the emergence of a newly entrenched "aristocracy." Drawing a distinction between "the rich man" and "the real patriot," the *Journal* argued that only the latter truly sought methods to "make men equal and happy."⁵⁸ Paralleling the fight against British Loyalists during the imperial crisis, the *Debtor's Journal* argued that Boston's wealthy politicians and merchants had created an unfair economic and social structure. As "true patriots," laborers sought to overcome this leadership and restore balance to Boston society.

⁵⁴ Cayton, "The Fragmentation of A Great Family," 146.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁶ Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, 25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Previously found only in broadsides and in explanations of riots and crowd actions, Boston's laboring population brought the issue of economic inequality into formal politics.⁵⁹

As laborers embraced the prospectus of the *Debtor's Journal* and its spiritual successor, the *New England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine*, issues of debt reform and unfair economic practices became a regular feature within Boston's print culture.⁶⁰ In addition to seeking reforms for debt imprisonment, laborers sought to overturn the 1803 law limiting wooden buildings and challenged unfairly high rents.⁶¹ In March 1822, the *New England Galaxy* reported that housewright Asa Lewis had submitted a petition signed by 4,500 Bostonians seeking to "alter or repeal" the law that workers had lightly resisted almost twenty years before. The *Daily Advertiser*, which the *New England Galaxy* characterized as a "vehicle of aristocracy," accused Lewis of collecting many of the signatures in "grog-shops."⁶² While the *Daily Advertiser* sought to disparage the petition, the accusation shows that nineteenth century laborers had maintained and repurposed the personal relationships within their community that had been effective for planning early colonial crowd actions. At grog shops, taverns, and disorderly houses, Boston's laboring community fostered the kinship networks that bound together their neighborhoods and ensured cooperation across occupations. Whereas eighteenth century laborers gathered at drinking establishments to fraternize and plan crowd actions,

⁵⁹ Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, 25.

⁶⁰ Joseph T. Buckingham, *Personal Memoirs and Recollections of Editorial Life*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1852), 73-101. Joseph T. Buckingham, established the *New England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine* in 1817 and catered to the skilled workers and artisans. Buckingham himself was not a Freemason, but he committed a portion of the paper to Mason affairs and handed control of it over to lawyer Samuel L. Knapp. After enduring several years of attacks from groups oppose to Freemasons, Buckingham dropped the reference from the title in the fall of 1820.

⁶¹ *New England Galaxy*, March 8, 1822.

⁶² *Ibid.*

nineteenth century laborers expanded on these activities and rallied their community to oppose unjust laws. In challenging Federalists over their policies, male laborers drew upon both the organizational tactics and the rhetoric of the previous generation and fought against economic stratification.

As white male laborers began to reestablish their political autonomy in pursuit of their own interests, even the *Columbian Centinel*, the local newspaper for the Federalist Party, was forced to address their complaints.⁶³ Rather than destroying property or assaulting Federalist politicians and merchants, Boston's male laborers sought redress for their economic concerns through the legislature and the press. Laborers did not abandon violence against middle and upper class Bostonians in the antebellum era, but during the 1820s and 1830s they attempted to leverage their status as enfranchised citizens to engage with middle and upper class Bostonians. Workers did not abandon crowd actions as a viable means of engendering social change, but expanded their strategies to include meetings, political organizations, and formal, nonviolent demonstrations. By apprising themselves of both formal and informal methods of activism, workers created a broad definition of politics and sought to convince Boston's political and economic leaders of their importance to the city.

After the *Debtor's Journal* and the *New England Galaxy* proved the viability of a distinctly laboring agenda within Boston politics, Boston's skilled and unskilled workers continued the campaign against aristocratic Federalist leadership through a coalition known as the Middling Interest. The loose political group, made up of journeymen artisans, struggling tradesmen, and some laborers, built upon the existing issues raised by the *Debtor's Journal* and crafted a reform platform that also included tax reduction and

⁶³ Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, 24-26.

changes to militia service.⁶⁴ The alliance between laborers, journeymen, and struggling but independent craftsmen mirrored the eighteenth century division between patrician and plebeian culture. Broadly defined as men engaged in “work,” the Middling Interest opposed genteel, “non-working,” elites and set the precedent for future organizations that would attempt to create broad laboring coalitions.

As the nineteenth century progressed, these alliances would shift depending on political and economic circumstances. In strikes and debates over wages and hours, journeymen and masters would split, as they found themselves divided along the lines of employees and employers. In other instances, including formal labor organizations and political controversies, journeymen and many masters united against wealthy upper class Federalists and Whigs. Newspapers like the *New England Galaxy* urged cooperation between artisans, journeymen, and unskilled laborers in order to focus on the upper class merchants and politicians that had subjected all other Bostonians to their whims. In 1822, the *New England Galaxy* used Boston’s mechanics as representatives of the “body of men that ever gave strength, support and security to any city or nation upon the earth.”⁶⁵ Reflecting the idea that workers throughout the Atlantic had been the engine of growth as “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” the *New England Galaxy* argued that Boston could not have risen to national importance without the town’s laboring community.⁶⁶ The paper believed that Boston’s workers had come under the control of “a contemptible minority of overgrown landlords and speculators... who have risen to wealth, and,

⁶⁴ Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Andrew Cayton, “The Fragmentation of A Great Family: The Panic of 1819 and the Rise of the Middling Interest in Boston, 1818-1822,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 2, no. 2 (July, 1982): 143-167; Matthew H. Crocker, *The Magic of the Many: Josiah Quincy and the Rise of Mass Politics in Boston, 1800-1830* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

⁶⁵ *New England Galaxy*, March 8, 1822.

⁶⁶ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 43.

consequently, to power, by means, which, if exposed, would have exalted them to the pillory.” Even as many master artisans sought to reduce journeymen to daily wage laborers, the *New England Galaxy* argued that the true problem in the town was the unjust aristocracy that had come to dominate political and economic life.

Echoing the rhetoric laid out in the *Debtor’s Journal* and the *New England Galaxy*, the Middling Interest asserted that the coalition had formed to resist the town’s Federalist “aristocracy.” Drawing comparisons between themselves and the laborers and tradesmen involved in the Boston Tea Party, the Middling Interest declared they would uphold the legacy of their “patriotic fathers” and protect Boston from “the unconstitutional designs of a FEW.”⁶⁷ In order to restore majority rule to the town, the Middling Interest and their allies took measures to abolish the town meeting system that had governed the town since its founding.

Although ostensibly the most direct form of democracy practiced in North American towns, Boston’s town meeting system no longer reflected the majority will of the town’s voting population. Federalist politicians had taken measures to subvert the town meeting and ensure that no populist challenge could be raised against their economic and political policies. According to their Democratic critics, wealthy Federalists abused parliamentary procedure and committees so that “sometime fifteen or twenty, seldom more...do all the business of a town that contains near seven thousand voters.”⁶⁸ Laboring and middling Bostonians could veto the laws and resolutions brought to a vote by this cabal, but the “monied aristocracy” prevented these groups from presenting their own proposals. By 1821, even Boston’s white laborers, who had helped

⁶⁷ Middling Interest, *An Exposition of the Principles and Views of the Middling Interest in the City of Boston* (Boston:1822), 5.

⁶⁸ Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, 49.

the Federalists defeat government reforms in 1784, 1792, 1804, and 1815, believed that the town's government needed to be restructured to address the obvious political, social, and economic inequality.⁶⁹

The Middling Interest demanded a change to the town meeting after the Committee of Finance directly opposed the will of the freeholders. Since the previous year, attendees of the town meeting had sought to consolidate the offices of County and Town Treasurer to streamline the collection of taxes and pay only one salary. After several votes in 1821 that reaffirmed this plan, the Committee of Finance proceeded to select two Federalists and maintain separate offices. Upon learning of the decision, the town meeting condemned the Committee of Finance for “a marked disrespect to the People [and] an utter disregard for their interest.” Fed up with the apparent oligarchy, middling and laboring voters called for new town regulations to ensure that they would no longer be “defeated in their intentions.”⁷⁰

As the debate over town government extended into 1822, the critical issue holding up reform proved to be ward voting. Throughout Boston's history, votes for major offices had been cast at Faneuil Hall in the Central District of town. The centralized location limited voting access for the town's laboring population, who predominantly lived in the more distant wards. Boston's laborers and their middling allies pushed for ward voting to relocate political power away from the more affluent center of town and reduce the personal influence of wealthy Federalists over the voting process.

Predictably, Federalists and other affluent Bostonians opposed ward voting, as it would prevent them from putting personal pressure as employers and community leaders

⁶⁹ Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, 50.

⁷⁰ *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston Containing Boston Town Records, 1814 to 1822* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1906), 222.

on voters as they traveled to the polls. As evidenced by the accusations of voter manipulation leveled against Federalists under the Embargo, the town's Federalists had grown adept at using centralized voting to deny lower and middling Bostonians representation. According to Samuel Adams, ward voting would counteract upper class intimidation and allow laborers to "choose a man of our own sentiments—one who we know."⁷¹ Adams also argued that ward voting would allow individuals to vote within their local neighborhood communities, which by the 1820s had become loosely sorted along racial and economic lines. By voting alongside like-minded individuals without upper class influence, laborers would be encouraged to participate in formal politics. Through ward voting, the laboring community and their middling allies could organize and engage with the political process without the explicit endorsement of organizations like the WBS. If centralized voting persisted at Faneuil Hall, Adams feared that Bostonians would attend Election Day as a large group of strangers and fall victim to Federalist manipulation.

In January 1822, Bostonians traveled to Faneuil Hall to cast their votes on a revised Boston charter and a referendum on ward voting. By an eight hundred vote margin, Boston abandoned the town meeting system and became a city with a directly elected mayor and city council. By a slightly narrower margin, Bostonians approved ward voting over the strenuous objections of wealthy Federalist leaders.⁷² Driven to rebel against the Federalists by economic depression and systemic inequality, a coalition of laborers and tradesmen transformed the town into a city and attempted to seize political power away from the town's aristocratic leaders.

⁷¹ Cayton, "The Fragmentation of A Great Family," 157.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 159.

By abolishing the town meeting and establishing ward voting, male workers scored a major victory against Boston's Federalist elites. Notably, laborers accomplished the feat by working within the political system as citizens rather than violently assaulting people and property. Laborers used the same personal networks that characterized the planning of eighteenth century crowd actions, but sought formal social change rather than command of the streets. Although male workers continue to lash out against aristocratic control and socioeconomic inequality as they had in the early colonial era, their tactics had shifted in response to middling and upper class expectations regarding republican government. From the 1820s onward, Boston's male laboring community would continue to push for economic reforms through laboring activism and formal organizations. Going forward, male workers would emphasize their critical role in Boston's economy as well as their status as citizens. Drawing upon the victory against Federalists in establishing a city government, male workers would grow emboldened as they sought additional measures to reverse their economic and social decline.

* * *

Although Boston's male laborers had defeated Federalist policies in 1822, the political victory did little to rectify the economic disparity between workers and upper class Bostonians. While workers had begun to oppose Federalist control over Boston in the 1820s, economic policies instituted after the War of 1812 would continue to affect the status of laborers and perpetuate their economic decline. During the war, a group of wealthy Boston merchants and investors, including Francis Cabot Lowell, Nathan Appleton, and Patrick Tracy Jackson, began investing in southern cotton and related

industries rather than reinvesting their capital into overseas trade.⁷³ Forming the core of what would become known as the Boston Associates, this group continued this investment after the war, especially as it became clear that Spain's weakening hold on the Western Hemisphere would allow southern cotton production to expand westward.⁷⁴ During the Panic of 1819, the collapse of cotton prices and international markets forced the Boston Associates to suspend their southern interests and look elsewhere to invest their capital. As a result, this group of wealthy Bostonians turned towards textile production and transitioned their enterprises from trading to manufacturing.

Rather than investing in Boston manufacturing, however, the Boston Associates set their sights on rural Massachusetts and southern New England. Throughout the 1790s, Boston had become home to several manufactories that produced paper hangings, sailcloth, and glass, but investors argued the lack of space and usable river systems near and around the Shawmut Peninsula prevented Boston from becoming an industrial center.⁷⁵ Instead, Boston's wealthy capitalists set their sights on the spinning mills that had been established in Pawtucket and Fall River, Rhode Island and in Dudley and Oxford Massachusetts.⁷⁶ Seeking to emulate the success of the small mills in Rhode Island and Western Massachusetts, Francis Cabot Lowell and several other Boston merchants established the Boston Manufacturing Company in nearby Waltham, Massachusetts. Using a power loom copied from English models, the Waltham mill was ten times larger than the older spinning mills and relied upon rural women and

⁷³ Lindsay Shakenbach, "From Discontented Bostonians to Patriotic Industrialists: The Boston Associates and the Transcontinental Treaty, 1790-1825," *The New England Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (September, 2011): 384.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁷⁵ Carr, *After the Siege*, 185-187

⁷⁶ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 16; Prude, *The Coming of the Industrial Order*, 50.

immigrants to perform the labor.⁷⁷ After the Boston Manufacturing Company proved to be a massive success that could compete with English mass production, Boston merchants sought other manufacturing locations and settled on a location along the Merrimack River that became known as Lowell.⁷⁸ By 1821, Boston's investors had shifted their emphasis from shipping to manufacturing and reduced their mercantile endeavors. By the end of the 1820s, about forty Boston families had joined the Lowells, Appeltons, and Jacksons in building textile mills along fast-moving rivers throughout New England.

In addition, members of the Boston Associates came to control almost all of Boston's banks and many of the railroad lines that connected the city to the surrounding hinterlands.⁷⁹ Much of the capital generated by the Boston Associates went towards reinvestment in nearby company towns and factories rather than in Boston itself. This allowed the Boston Associates to control more than one fifth of all cotton spindles in the United States by 1850, but ensured that Boston would not receive similar capital investment. As a result, Boston's manufacturing capacity languished and could claim less than 10,000 industrial workers in the city and surrounding suburbs.⁸⁰ Unwilling to pursue manufacturing in the city in which they lived, the Boston Associates ensured that the city's industry would remain, in the words of Oscar Handlin, "small in scale and local in character."⁸¹ Although Boston had grown into one of the largest cities in the United

⁷⁷ Prude, *The Coming of the Industrial Order*, 51.

⁷⁸ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 18.

⁷⁹ Thomas O'Connor, *The Athens of America: Boston, 1825-1845* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 15.

⁸⁰ Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790-1880: A Study in Acculturation* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 10.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

States, laborers continued to work in a maritime and mercantile economy that remained largely unchanged from its colonial contours.

The emergence of the Boston Associates as the core of Boston's upper class created an environment in which the city's wealthy leaders guided its political and social development but did not meaningfully invest in its economy. Boston's male laborers had dealt a blow to Federalist elites by eliminating the town meeting, but the rise of the Boston Associates allowed for an even stronger aristocracy to establish itself in the city. Rather than investing to diversify the city's economy, Boston's affluent families instead sought to improve infrastructure and public buildings that would facilitate their endeavors in surrounding mill towns. Under Mayor Josiah Quincy, for instance, Boston filled in the Mill Creek between the North and West End neighborhoods, built new seawalls, renovated the Town Dock, and constructed a new marketplace near Faneuil Hall.⁸² While these projects modernized many of Boston's commercial centers, much to the pride of upper class residents, they also drove the city into considerable debt. Boston's affluent families used public funds both to refine the city and to enact reforms designed to eradicate vice, crime, and riots, but insisted that laborers find their own economic opportunities. More often than not, Boston's wealthy West End families sought only to remove visible signs of the working poor rather than to take measures that would improve standards of living for laborers. As a result, Boston's politically active laborers found themselves still at the mercy of a deeply entrenched aristocracy that encouraged economic inequality and greeted their complaints with apathy.

In the 1820s, Boston's laboring population grew more willing to attack the city's wealthy inhabitants as their financial status grew increasingly dire. Even as Boston

⁸² O'Connor, *The Athens of America*, 30-32.

moved beyond the Panic of 1819, Boston's skilled and unskilled workers watched the continuous degradation of their laboring status. Similar to the status of workers in other northern cities, laborers found themselves forced into an intensely competitive economic environment in which employers treated workers as interchangeable unskilled day labor. Beginning in 1826, Reverend Joseph Tuckerman began to describe the status of the city's workers as head of the Boston Mission at Large. In his capacity as City Missionary, Tuckerman sought to draw attention to the city's poor workers and demonstrate to affluent Bostonians how the economy they had helped create fostered poverty and vice. By instilling "a mutual Christian sympathy and feeling of brotherhood" between employers and employees, Tuckerman hoped that he could encourage the rich to embrace a moral economy and improve the lives of laborers.⁸³

In his writings, Tuckerman also defended those poor laboring Bostonians who were often criticized for being unwilling or unable to work to support themselves and their families. At the lowest level of poverty, Tuckerman found unskilled laborers who, during economic depressions and recessions, could be seen "standing idle in the streets or upon the wharves, except, perchance, when they can earn twelve and a half or twenty-five cents by the strange circumstance of having an opportunity for an hour or two of labor." Tuckerman also revealed that among the poorest families, many women did not have the skills necessary to find work as seamstresses or washerwomen. As a result, women borrowed, begged, or stole food to support themselves. Especially during times of

⁸³ Joseph Tuckerman, *On the Elevation of the Poor: A Selection from His Reports as Minister at Large in Boston*, ed. E.E. Hale (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874), 28.

economic struggle, unskilled laborers and their families walked the "hair-breadth division between partial self-support and constant and absolute dependence."⁸⁴

While the working poor were a familiar category for many Bostonians, Tuckerman also reminded his affluent audience of "those who are but occasionally and partially poor." This group included skilled men and women who had entered into established trades but could not rise beyond their unstable laboring status:

It includes a considerable number of journeymen mechanics, and of other men who depend on monthly wages, or on daily earnings...It includes, also, tailoresses, a subordinate class of milliners, respectable nurses, skillful and industrious laundresses, and some others who are constantly supplied with work, while they can do it, by the enterprising mechanics who employ them...But while the heads of these families have their health, they need not and they ask not for charity...It is important, however, to understand that a very small reverse of circumstances may, in a short time, bring them to poverty. To these reverses they are constantly exposed; and while suffering under them they will be partially and temporarily poor.⁸⁵

In explaining that Boston's poor included unskilled and skilled laboring men and women, Tuckerman described a struggle that laborers had been intimately familiar with since the early colonial era. Whereas they were once considered the "lower sort" and defined by their cultural differences, Tuckerman argued that the town's workers could now be defined by their inability to find self-sufficiency, especially during times of economic hardship. As many tradesmen could no longer expect to become independent masters and open their own shops, the classification reflected how economically similar artisans and unskilled laborers had become since the imposition of the bastard artisan system.

Tuckerman concluded that the root cause of poverty among Boston's laboring population, and of vice as well, was the "*inadequacy* of the wages paid to a large class of

⁸⁴ Tuckerman, *On the Elevation of the Poor*, 65.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

the poor to supply even the bare necessities of life.”⁸⁶ The City Missionary, through his work among Boston’s workers and through his writing, counteracted the argument advanced by many employers that “every one who is temperate, honest, and industrious, may always obtain the means of a comfortable support for a family.” Tuckerman did not go so far as to mandate higher wages for men and women, but hoped that employers would “remunerate them fairly, fully, and when they are able, even generously” for their services.⁸⁷ By instilling Christian virtue in both employers and employees, Tuckerman sought to bring the two groups closer together and, in the process, show employers how higher wages could be seen as part of their moral, religious duty. Until missionaries and clergy could accomplish that aim, Tuckerman believed that the solution was to direct charity towards deserving families, reduce the number of “foreign poor,” and encourage the spread of Christianity.

Although Boston’s white male laborers had sought lower taxes in the previous years as part of the Middling Interest coalition, they had not yet organized for higher wages. The slow adoption of the bastard artisan system and the increased competition for even daily wage labor, however, convinced Boston’s laborers to take direct action for economic improvement. After watching their standard of living gradually decline for more than a generation, white male workers refused to wait for Christian solidarity to bring about a moral and fair economy. In April 1825, a group of journeymen carpenters announced that they would meet at the city’s concert hall and those journeymen “who are in favor of limiting the number of hours for days work.”⁸⁸ The subsequent resolves, drafted by over 450 journeymen and supported by almost 600 during the ensuing strike,

⁸⁶ Tuckerman, *On the Elevation of the Poor*, 79.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸⁸ *Independent Chronicle*, April 6, 1825.

demanded that ten hours be the maximum amount of work a day, and that daily wages be raised to two dollars.⁸⁹

Comparatively, journeymen carpenters in New York City already enjoyed a ten-hour day but received one dollar and thirty seven and a half cents per day, while Philadelphia's employers paid journeymen carpenters two dollars and twenty five cents for twelve hours of work.⁹⁰ Boston's journeymen sought higher wages and a regular ten-hour schedule, but only to bring their compensation in line with other ports. In explaining their reasoning, the striking journeymen house carpenters pointed to the same economic factors elucidated by Joseph Tuckerman. The carpenters argued that at a time when there are "a very considerable number of Journeymen Carpenters who are out of employ," the current structure rendered it "impossible for a Journeyman Housewright and House Carpenter to maintain a family...with the wages which are now usually given."⁹¹ The *New England Galaxy* sarcastically noted that, with the Boston Associates firmly in control of the city's political and economic structure, the strike was the result of "our democratic form of government."⁹² As one of the earliest occupations to be affected by the individual task system and the imposition of daily wages, house carpenters believed they had no other recourse but to use their political experience to demand better economic conditions.

In the days following the strike, Boston's middling and upper class inhabitants largely condemned the journeymen carpenters for their demands. One anonymous merchant, writing to the *Columbian Centinel*, advised the journeymen to simply "resume

⁸⁹ *Columbian Centinel*, April 20, 1825; *New Bedford Mercury*, April 15, 1825

⁹⁰ *Boston Weekly Messenger*, May 31, 1825; *Essex Register*, April 14, 1825.

⁹¹ *Columbian Centinel*, April 23, 1825.

⁹² *New England Galaxy*, April 29, 1825.

their honest labors, lay up part of their wages, and become *Masters* as soon as possible.”⁹³ In a joint meeting of “gentlemen engaged in building” that included Federalist Harrison Gray Otis, upper class merchants and businessmen announced their support of the master carpenters’ refusal to negotiate and argued that the journeymen had deviated from the traditional system in which “Apprentices and Journeymen, accustomed to industrious and temperate habits, have, in their turn, become [sic] thriving and respectable Masters.” The affluent group feared that if this “spirit of discontent and insubordination” continued, it must “extend to and embrace all the Working Classes in every department in Town and Country, thereby affecting a most injurious change in all the modes of business.”⁹⁴ While the resolutions did not state it explicitly, the gentlemen, many of them likely members of the Boston Associates, feared that the house carpenters strike would encourage workers at Lowell and other mill towns to strike for similar demands. Worried that a successful strike in Boston would lead to a ten-hour movement taking root in Lowell, Boston’s upper class capitalists did everything in their power to oppose the journeymen carpenters.

In order to apply pressure against the strike, the gentlemen leveraged their status as the city’s main investors. The Boston Associates and other upper class Bostonians announced that if the strike were to succeed, they would not grant new building contracts to any of the striking journeymen or any masters who had accepted the demands. Using their wealth and control over the city’s economy, the upper class group circumvented the pressure journeymen had placed on masters and asserted that any possible changes in the terms of labor would end in unemployment. With little hope for success, the strike

⁹³ *Columbian Centinel*, April 20, 1825.

⁹⁴ *Essex Register*, April 25, 1825.

collapsed and most of the journeymen returned to work less than two weeks after they had begun the protest.⁹⁵ Before dissolving the effort, a group of Journeymen House Carpenters and Masons attempted to hold a meeting at Faneuil Hall, where the city's voters would decide if the ten-hour day would become the standard for all of the city's journeymen.⁹⁶ Their petition, signed by carpenters, masons, and a variety of trades including unskilled laborers, truckmen, and cordwainers, requested that Mayor Josiah Quincy and the Board of Aldermen convene the proposed meeting on May 12. With the strike already defeated, Quincy labeled the petition "inexpedient" and the question was never put before the general Boston population.⁹⁷

Although the 1825 Journeymen Carpenters strike failed in its attempt to raise wages and obtain a ten-hour day, it set the precedent for the city's future labor struggle. Male laborers would attempt to use all of the tactics at their disposal to address unfair economic behavior without alienating potentially sympathetic Bostonians. Using the same methods of public activism that had helped the Middling Interest counteract the influence of Federalist elites, Boston's white male laborers challenged employers without resorting to crowd actions. In doing so, Boston's workers made it difficult for their more affluent neighbors to dismiss their economic arguments as excuses to engage in public violence. Although many middling and upper class Bostonians sought to associate the strike with the disorder that characterized eighteenth and nineteenth century riots, they could not dispute that by the 1820s, laborers could no longer live comfortably off the wages they received.

⁹⁵ *Essex Register*, April 28, 1825.

⁹⁶ *Columbian Centinel*, April 27, 1825.

⁹⁷ Petition For General Meeting for Establishing the House of Labor of Mechanicks, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, Boston, Massachusetts; Petition of Alpheus Simmons and Others for a General Meeting, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

The Boston Associates and their allies, however, benefitted from the economic structure that they had helped create and continued to claim that the status of workers and the traditional craft system had not changed since the early colonial era. On the contrary, the dramatic increase in competition among Boston's laborers, combined with the imposition of a daily wage system by master artisans, had created an economic environment in which journeymen could no longer count on establishing their independence. In 1796, for instance, master blacksmiths outnumbered journeymen and apprentices four to one. Over the next few decades, this ratio had reversed itself so that by 1832, journeymen and apprentice blacksmiths outnumbered masters by a seven to one ratio.⁹⁸ While the structure appeared to be the same as the merchants and manufacturers claimed, the traditional craft system was methodically transitioning towards permanent wage labor and outwork.

The strike also revealed how the Boston Associates would retain control over the city's economic policies in the decades ahead. Although they did not often hire journeymen mechanics or unskilled laborers directly, instead granting contracts to masters, upper class leaders intervened to ensure that the town's laboring population would not enjoy the same success found by striking workers in New York, Philadelphia, or Baltimore. As evidenced by their resolves, the "gentlemen" of Boston feared a successful strike would encourage similar activities at their textile mills throughout New England. By dictating terms to middling masters and workers alike, the Boston Associates maintained their hold over the city's economic structure and insisted that Boston's labor struggle would not be a direct negotiation between employers and employees.

⁹⁸ Kornblith, "From Artisans to Businessmen," 214.

Finally, the 1825 Journeyman Carpenters strike hinted at the strategies Boston's laborers would apply in future strikes and demonstrations. After organizing as a single trade association, the journeymen carpenters reached out to journeymen masons, who worked alongside them on construction projects, before seeking alliances with journeymen and unskilled laborers across all occupations. Seeking to leverage their coalition's status as voters and citizens, the carpenters sought to legitimize the strike through their proposed referendum at Faneuil Hall. By bringing their struggle to the general populace, carpenters appear to have believed they would be able to overcome the influence of the powerful but small group of Boston Associates. While these efforts sought as many supporters as possible, they ignored potential alliances with women, African Americans, and Irish Catholic immigrants. In formulating their opposition to Boston's aristocracy, the journeymen carpenters conceived of an alliance that was decidedly white, male, and Protestant.

In the subsequent years, Boston's white male workers continued to use political organizations to address economic inequality and fight for financial security. In August 1830, laborers in Boston founded the Working Man's Party, a formal third-party that incorporated much of the platform designed by the Middling Interest in the decade prior. In the mission statement of the party's newspaper, the *Working Man's Advocate*, the organization laid out the formal changes they sought in Boston society:

Equal Universal Education; Abolishment Of Imprisonment For Debt; Abolition Of All Licensed Monopolies; *An Entire Revision or Abolition of the Present Militia System*; A Less Expensive Law System; Equal Taxation of Property; *An Effective Lien Law for Laborers on building*; A District System of Elections; No Legislation On Religion.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ *Working Man's Advocate*, December 4, 1830.

In a committee report issued to the "Working Men of Boston," party asserted that they desired these reforms because of the apathy shown by upper class leaders. The Working Man's Party referenced how laborers had been "flattered into subserviency, or wheedled into silence, by an apparent attention to their demands, by temporary and hypocritical efforts in their behalf, or by soothing assurances and hollow pledges."¹⁰⁰ By repeatedly ignoring the needs of Boston's laboring population and enriching their own interest in the process, Boston's upper classes had created "two grand orders of society--the rich and the poor--between them whom there is an impassable gulf."¹⁰¹ In order to correct this social imbalance and seize control back from the wealthy, the Working Man's Party looked to organize laborers and elect individuals representative of their own interests. Although the Working Man's Party terrified Democrats and Federalists alike due to its formal organization of the city's laborers, it failed to make a discernible impact on Election Day.¹⁰²

Boston's male laborers also joined efforts to organize workers through the "New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics, and other Working Men." Originally founded in Providence, Rhode Island in 1831, the NEA was the region's first major attempt to bring together a broad coalition of workers across trades and occupations. Tying the labor struggle to the American Revolution, the NEA argued that the organization was needed "to take a firm, manly, and decided stand in defence of our rights--to claim the privileges of freemen, and not to have our services demanded by

¹⁰⁰ Working Men of Boston, *The Committee appointed by the Working Men of Boston : at their Meeting the 3d ultimo, having duly considered the important matter assigned to them, in obedience to the instruction of their constituents, offer the following report...* (Boston, c. 1829), Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Edward Pessen, "Did Labor Support Jackson?: The Boston Story," *Political Science Quarterly*, 64, no. 2 (June, 1949): 274.

others on their own conditions." Seeking to reform an economic environment in which "the Capitalist, the Merchant, and the Manufacturer assume to themselves the absolute and unconditional right of stipulating the prices of labor," the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics, and other Working Men wished to address inequality so that laborers could "obtain a comfortable livelihood, by the reasonable exercise of industrious habits, and our children be afford the necessary means and opportunity to acquire that education and intelligence absolutely necessary to American freemen." In order to help accomplish this aim, each member of the NEA pledged to labor for no more than ten hours a day and to only accept full payment for any work completed.¹⁰³ With a concrete set of organizational standards, the NEA hoped to ensure that New England's laborers would form a united front against their employers.¹⁰⁴

In February 1832, one hundred delegates of the NEA met in Boston for its first convention since its inception. Since the NEA only accepted white male laborers as members, the meeting attracted urban mechanics and manufactory workers, but did little to draw support from female or male mill workers in New England's factory towns.¹⁰⁵ While those delegates who attended accomplished little more than reaffirming their commitment to "devising means for ameliorating the condition of the laboring population of the community," the convention led Boston's male workers to respond in two very different ways. First, a group of workers opened an auxiliary branch of the NEA in order to better coordinate with the regional organization and plan a second convention in

¹⁰³ *Co-Operator*, April 3, 1832. The NEA's constitution suggests that employers regularly tried to pay less than the agreed upon amount after the labor was completed. Article four of the constitution required members to accept only full payment unless otherwise decided by a court or mediation.

¹⁰⁴ *New England Artisan*, January 5, 1832.

¹⁰⁵ Zonderman, *Uneasy Allies*, 36. Zonderman has argued that even if the NEA had allowed women to be members, their tendency to compare female workers to exploited children may have discouraged women from partnering with the organization. By not appealing to women, the NEA lacked influence with textile workers and urban women like servants, laundresses, and seamstresses.

September. Secondly, a group of journeymen shipwrights and caulkers met on March 12, "to consider the expediency of regulating their wages and the number of hours to constitute a day's work."¹⁰⁶ By March 29, the *New England Artisan* reported in passing that the shipwrights, caulkers, and "others" in the city had put the ten-hour system into "complete operation."¹⁰⁷ Roughly two weeks after meeting separately from the NEA, Boston's journeymen shipwrights and caulkers voted to take up the ten-hour system and establish it at the city's shipyards.

Like the 1825 journeymen carpenters, the journeymen shipwrights and caulkers appear to have been Anglo-American workers who, in addition to working together at Boston and Charlestown's shipyards, knew each other through their connections within the laboring community. In March 1832, the Boston and Charlestown Association of Shipwrights and Caulkers postponed their scheduled meeting because many of them had to attend an annual meeting of the area's fire companies in accordance with their service to the Fire Department.¹⁰⁸ As Boston's fire companies organized themselves along rough geographic lines, the delay suggests that the shipwrights and caulkers worked on the same vessels and lived in the same neighborhoods. Striking for the ten-hour day, then, testified to the community ties that persisted among laborers in the antebellum period despite economic and demographic upheaval.

Despite the significance of a strike in one of Boston's core industries, coverage of the journeymen shipwrights and caulkers disappeared from Boston's papers for several months. It is possible that the shipwrights and caulkers negotiated with their masters, or that they were waiting for the summer months to make their demands. In May,

¹⁰⁶ *New England Artisan*, March 15, 1832.

¹⁰⁷ *New England Artisan*, March 29, 1832.

¹⁰⁸ *Daily Morning Post*, March 31, 1832.

journeymen from the two trades met and resolved to “use every exertion to persuade their employers, to allow their hands three hours instead of two, for their meals, during the hot months of summer, and also allow them to quit work on Saturdays at 6 o’clock P.M., commencing June 1st.”¹⁰⁹

While the journeymen shipwrights and caulkers issued these terms to their master employers, Boston’s merchants and ship owners took the unusual step of issuing a response first. Like their predecessors during the 1825 Journeymen Carpenters Strike, the city’s upper classes rejected the journeymen’s demands and argued that the current system, based on “individual freedom and enterprise,” needed to be preserved. Additionally, despite evidence to the contrary presented by both journeymen and their upper and middling allies, the merchants insisted that “the price of mechanical skill and labour in Boston has been and now is as high, if not higher, than in any city in the world.” Denying that the shipwrights and caulkers had valid complaints, one hundred and six of the city’s merchants and ship owners urged the workers to abandon the “folly and caprice of a few journeymen mechanics.” Finally, the group repeated the effective upper class threat from 1825 and vowed to neither hire any journeyman nor contract with any master who pledged to uphold a ten-hour day.¹¹⁰

With upper class capitalists firmly entrenched, the master shipwrights and caulkers did not even bother to issue a statement explaining their opposition to the ten-hour day. Instead, the masters demonstrated their unanimous rejection of the journeymen’s positions by agreeing “to abide by and to support the resolutions of the Merchants of Boston in regard to the employment of journeymen who belong to any

¹⁰⁹ *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 19, 1832.

¹¹⁰ John Commons et al., eds., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Vol. 6, *Labour Movement* (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1910), 82.

combination with respect to the time or price of labor.”¹¹¹ Although the merchants had insisted that “labour ought always to be left free to regulate itself, and that neither the employer nor the employed should have the power to control the other,” in reality the city’s wealthy merchants had created an economic environment where they controlled the terms of labor for both master employers and journeymen employees. Through their statement, the city’s merchants asserted their control over the city’s middling masters and ensured that any negotiations would be between the city’s upper classes and laborers.

In response to these developments, the Society of Shipwrights and Caulkers issued an address to explain their reasoning and offer a small concession to the merchants. Answering the charge that the journeymen were paid well, for instance, the group explained that when a ship was transported from one part of the city to another, journeymen were forced to assist in the relocation without being compensated for their services. As a result, the journeymen found themselves “labouring four days for two days’ pay.” In addition, the journeymen asserted that unlike many other trades, shipwrights and caulkers could not work in wet weather or in very cold weather. Subsequently, shipwrights and caulkers spent nearly a third of the year without work. With these limitations in mind, the workers argued that they made less than a dollar a day and that “there is but very few of us than can, at the end of the year, make both ends meet.”¹¹²

To demonstrate that they were “good and honest men,” the Society announced that members would “labour by night or day...to facilitate the business of the merchant, or our employer” as long as they were paid overtime for any time over ten hours. While

¹¹¹ John Commons et al., eds., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Vol. 6, 86.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

they conceded that they would work whenever the merchants and ship owners demanded, the journeymen insisted that they still negotiated from a position of strength. Tying their struggle to the American Revolution, the workers reminded the merchants “we were all born free and equal” and declared that “we do not ask to have our grievances redressed as a favor, but we demand it as a right.”¹¹³

Remaining steadfast in their demand for a ten-hour day, the journeymen shipwrights and caulkers found themselves locked out by their employers and upper class merchants. By mid-July, the two months without work forced the journeymen to abandon their demands and return to work. Assured that they had successfully defeated the shipwrights and caulkers, the city's upper classes reinforced their mastery over Boston's economic affairs through a small concession. On July 20, a group of merchants, meeting at the Exchange Coffee House, issued what would become known as the “Cholera Ukase.” The declaration stated:

...considering the extreme warmth of the weather, and the fear of Pestilence that pervades the community, it is the sense of this meeting that the Master Carpenters and Caulkers be authorised to allow their journeymen, two hours intermission at noon during the present month and August. It being *expressly understood* that they shall commence the days work at sunrise, and terminate at Sunset.¹¹⁴

Two months after laborers had demanded the ten-hour day as a right, Boston's merchants granted it as a temporary favor during the hottest months of the year. The merchants claimed the decision was driven by the threat of cholera that had come to the city earlier in the year. By allowing journeymen to return to their homes for lunch, merchants believed shipwrights and caulkers would be less likely to congregate and catch cholera

¹¹³ John Commons et al., eds., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Vol. 6, 84.

¹¹⁴ *New England Artisan*, July 26, 1832.

from their fellow workers.¹¹⁵ In addition, the merchants assumed that the masters involved in the shipbuilding industry would immediately comply with the edict and regulate hours based on the merchants' instructions. Not only did the "Ukase" grant a temporary ten-hour day only after the workers who had fought for it had been defeated, but it also announced what laborers had known since the 1825 Journeymen Carpenters strike. Since the emergence of the Boston Associates, the city's economic structure had been controlled by a small group of elites who could dictate policy to laborers and their employers.

Unsurprisingly, Boston's laborers responded to the declaration with anger and hostility. Jacob Frieze, the moderate editor of the *New England Artisan*, fumed at the "degrading" statement and asserted that it "recognises, to all intents and purposes the principle of slavery, in its most disgusting form"¹¹⁶ Laborers referred to the announcement as a ukase, the term used for proclamations issued by the Czar of Russia, because the "Aristocrats" of Boston had treated "the Mechanics of Boston like negro slaves, or the serfs of Russia." Seth Luther, a journeyman carpenter from Rhode Island who rising to prominence in New England's fledgling labor movement, denounced the merchants for only "*pretending to be American citizens.*"¹¹⁷ After the merchants had "pledged themselves...to drive to starvation or submission, the Shipwrights, Caulkers, and Gravers" only a few months before, Seth Luther believed the Ukase to be a sign that the upper classes would do anything if it meant bringing themselves more wealth.¹¹⁸

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¹¹⁵ *New England Artisan*, July 26, 1832.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Seth Luther, *An Address to the Working Men of New England on the State of Education, and on the Condition of the Producing Classes in Europe and America* (New York: George H. Evans, 1833), 27.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

Like the journeymen carpenters in 1825, the journeymen shipwrights and caulkers found themselves stymied in their pursuit of the ten-hour day not by their employers, but by Boston's upper class merchants and manufacturers. In both instances, Boston's economic elites used their influence to control the terms handed down by master artisans and force male laborers to back away from their demands. While this strategy in 1825 prevented white workers from striking for several years, it served as a motivation for action in 1832. Understanding that no progress would be made until the city's "aristocracy" was defeated, workers used the failure of the journeymen shipwrights and caulkers to build a coalition that spanned all trades and occupations.

Notably, this confederation would be built without the assistance of the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics, and other Working Men. In October 1833, only twenty-five delegates attended the third convention of the NEA. According to the New Haven representatives, farmers and mechanics participated in the proceedings, but "workingmen" and factory workers were barely represented.¹¹⁹ The convention adopted a resolution endorsing the creation of a "Trades Union," but believed that such an organization could not be formed until every city and town founded local NEA chapters. As mill and urban workers grew increasingly frustrated with the NEA's lack of progress and interest in their plight, the organization rapidly fell into disfavor. The NEA met for a final time in September 1834 before finally disbanding without any major accomplishments to its name.¹²⁰

New England workers, and especially Boston's skilled laborers, likely felt comfortable abandoning the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics, and Other

¹¹⁹ John Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, Vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 313.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 315.

Working Men because something more immediate had emerged to take its place. In March 1834, artisans representing fourteen different trades met at the Old Common Council Room and assembled the General Convention of the Trades' of Boston. Organized by Charles Douglas, the increasingly radical editor of the *New England Artisan*, and assisted by cabinetmaker James Sharp, mason Dunbar Harris, and carpenter Seth Luther, the convention formally established the Boston Trades' Union and drafted a constitution modeled after the New York Trades' Union.¹²¹ While the meeting had been arranged with the assistance of leading members of the NEA, the organization appears to have functioned independently of the previous organization.

In contrast with the NEA, the Boston Trades' Union appeared poised to take direct action in order to support the economic interests of laborers throughout New England. In their call for a convention, published on February 20, 1834, the committee tasked with organizing the BTU argued, "something should be done to improve the conditions of the mechanics of our city and vicinity, which will prevent the fatal results which have followed the adoption of cruel and heartless policy toward the Mechanics of Europe." Comparing their plight with that of industrial workers of Europe and other parts of the United States, the BTU believed that Boston required an organization that mirrored those already in place in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. According to the committee, these organizations promoted "concentrated action" that had led to economic environments in which "employers and employed seem to be harmoniously united for the mutual benefit of both."¹²² Although this description downplayed the ongoing friction between laborers and employers in these cities, the BTU tied itself to other urban trades

¹²¹ *The Man*, March 12, 1834.

¹²² John Commons et al., eds., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Vol. 6, 82.

unions in order to distinguish itself from the ineffective NEA. Rather than waiting for the organization to grow throughout New England, the BTU wished to take direct measures that would improve the conditions of working men.

Unlike the trade unions in Philadelphia and New York City, the Boston Trades' Union accepted both journeymen and masters as members. While this seriously weakened the ability of journeymen to organize for improved wages and working conditions, it reflected the overwhelming influence of the Boston Associates. In an address to the New York Trades' Union acknowledging the issue, an anonymous "Boston Mechanic" argued that in Boston's economic system, it was too easy for the boss to be "brought back to journeywork by hard luck, and the journeyman may expect in his turn to become an employer." In addition, the author argued that instead of three classes in Boston, there were only two:

Mechanics, farmers, artisans, and all who labor, whether as boss or journeyman, have a common interest in sustaining each other—the rich men, the professional men, and all who now live, or who intend hereafter to live without useful labor, depending on the sweat of their neighbor's brow for support, have also a common interest. And their interest is promoted by working us hard, and working us cheap.¹²³

By joining with sympathetic masters, laborers focused their efforts on overturning Boston's "aristocracy," who they believed sought nothing more than to improve their own interests by degrading the status of working men. For those masters willing to join, the Trades Union allowed employers to demonstrate their independence from upper class merchants and manufacturers after a decade of unilateral decrees. The BTU sought to create an environment in which employers and employees were free to negotiate the terms of labor without the interference of third parties like the Boston Associates.

¹²³ *The Man*, May 30, 1834.

Journeyman limited their ability to organize for better wages and the ten-hour day, but created an organization that could combat the obvious economic inequality that emerged in the nineteenth century city.

The Boston Trades' Union attempted to broaden their appeal to all workers by issuing a Declaration of Rights in June 1834. Published in *The Man*, a prominent New York labor newspaper, the declaration assured Bostonians that the organization sought to “give to the producing or working classes their just standing in society, by constitutional, peaceable, and legal means.” By claiming legal legitimacy, the BTU sought to undermine the upper class argument that unions represented illegal conspiracies or “combinations.” According to the Declaration, workers possessed the right to associate together and regulate the terms of their own labor. Asserting that they were within their rights as citizens of both Boston and the United States, the BTU argued that the “use by our opponents of the word combination, making it synonymous with insurrection” was “a gross perversion of language.”¹²⁴

Through the Declaration of Rights, the Boston Trades' Union tied their struggle to the American Revolution and the 1780 Massachusetts constitution. Expounding upon the principles that workers had espoused for decades, the Boston Trades' Union asserted that ideology at the core of labor activism could be traced directly back to the Revolutionary generation:

With the Fathers of our Country, we hold that all men are created free and equal; endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and we hold, that to secure to each individual, the possession of those rights; should and ought to be the principal object of all legislation; consequently, that laws which have a tendency to raise

¹²⁴ Philip Foner, *We, The Other People: Alternative Declarations of Independence by Labor Groups, Farmers, Woman's Rights Advocates, Socialists, and Blacks, 1829-1975* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 54.

any peculiar class above their fellow citizens, by granting special privileges, are contrary to and in defiance of those primary principles.¹²⁵

Contradicting the argument from upper class merchants and manufacturers that unions and trade societies were antithetical to American economic tradition, the Boston Trades' Union argued that trade union movement reflected the democratic ideals and desire for a moral, more equal economy that were inherent to the American Revolution. Much like Boston's colonial laboring community, the Trades' Union singled out unfair economic practices and sought to restore the social aspect of radical Evangelicalism that placed the needs of the community over personal profit. Targeting the social and economic inequality that had come to characterize antebellum Boston, the Boston Trades' Union repackaged the ideology of Boston's colonial laboring community and equated their struggle with the imperial crisis.

Throughout the summer of 1834, the Boston Trades' Union proved that this message, and their unusual strategy of partnering with employers, could find support in the New England city. On the Fourth of July, roughly one thousand laborers marched in a procession from the Massachusetts State House to Fort Hill in the South End. The parade included a printing press mounted on a platform distributing broadsides, as well as "the ship *Mechanic*, with a forty foot keel, completely rigged, armed, and manned, drawn by twenty-four white horses." According to the *Liberator*, the "Shipwrights of Boston, South Boston, and Charlestown," many of whom likely had participated in the strike only two years before, had built the vessel.¹²⁶ Afterwards, approximately nine hundred laborers dined at Faneuil Hall in celebration of the holiday. A far cry from the low turnout seen at

¹²⁵ Foner, *We, The Other People*, 53.

¹²⁶ *Liberator*, July 12, 1834.

the conventions of the NEA, the procession demonstrated that the BTU had quickly attracted a receptive audience among the city's laborers.

The 1834 parade also demonstrate the BTU's willingness to embrace the public demonstrations favored by Boston's laboring community. Since the WBS in the 1810s, the city's white male laborers had been encouraged to appropriate the rituals of public demonstration for use in formal politics and electioneering. Using public processions for nonviolent means, Boston's male laborers gained influence within the public sphere and found that their demonstrations could engender political change. Empowered by this experience, Boston's workers used personal kinship networks to increase laboring activism in order to challenge the limits on wooden buildings and Federalist control over the town meeting system. After the NEA failed to claim any major accomplishments in its brief existence, the BTU embraced direct action and returned to the strategies and demonstrations that appealed to Boston's workers. Drawing upon both the rhetoric and the public displays of the imperial crisis, the BTU created a labor organization that valued the social, economic, and cultural contributions of the city's workers.

Although the Boston Trades' Union found broad appeal only four months after its inception, it continued the tendency of the NEA to ignore large portions of the laboring population. In the appeals to the public that appeared in newspapers and its own publications, the Boston Trades' Union assumed its members would be white, male, Protestant workers. In their coverage of the Fourth of July procession, for instance, the *New England Artisan* complained that the BTU was forced to dine at Faneuil Hall after twenty-two different clergy members rejected their requests to use their churches. Although the churches did not explain why they had collectively rejected the BTU, the

decision suggests that the clergy were unwilling to show support for the BTU. While they may have been afraid of any potential damage caused by hosting almost a thousand workers within their buildings, the religious leaders may also have feared offending the wealthy merchants who formed an important part of their congregations and charitable activities. The *Artisan* suggested as much, arguing that since the BTU included “a large proportion of church members and pew holders,” the clergy’s decision to side with employers and merchants “should fill with regret and serious alarm, the minds of all Christians.”¹²⁷

In addition, some observers lamented the virtual lack of women among the ranks of the Boston Trades’ Union. Representatives from the Lynn Female Society had attended the founding meeting of the Boston Trades’ Union in March 1834, but both representatives had been men.¹²⁸ Equating membership in the BTU with citizenship and formal politics, the Union requested male representatives out of a belief that only men could speak in public and hold leadership positions.¹²⁹ Since women had already begun to speak in public while organizing in Lowell, it is very likely that the Lynn Female Society and other female mill workers took this as an insult. Women would not be allowed to directly participate in formal labor conventions until 1845, when the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association played a critical role in the creation of the New England Workingmen’s Association.¹³⁰

In Boston, female workers publicly criticized that they had been excised from the city’s laboring community and identity in December 1834. In *The Aristocrat and Trade*

¹²⁷ *The Man*, July 22, 1834.

¹²⁸ *The Man*, March 12, 1834.

¹²⁹ Murphy, *Ten Hours’ Labor*, 50.

¹³⁰ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 116.

Union Advocate, an anonymous “Working Woman of Boston” wrote a poem describing a meeting between the publication's titular characters. In her preface, the author compared the current labor struggle to Boston’s economic system in the previous decades. She wrote that “in those days Mechanics were not called ‘lower orders,’ nor were working women called Servants or required to consider themselves of lower origin than their employers.”¹³¹ Building on Seth Luther’s 1832 condemnation of the division between Boston’s higher and lower orders, the author believed that women had been left out of the latter term. Boston’s female laborers explained that without consideration for their own eroding status, women’s work had grown increasingly dishonorable and carried with it humiliating treatment at the hands of affluent Bostonians.¹³²

By focusing on female domestic servants, the “Working Woman of Boston” demonstrated how the nascent labor movement had utilized masculinity in the formulation of its identity. Previously willing to recognize that women played a critical role in Boston’s economy and in ensuring families could find some degree of financial stability, male laborers had politicized the concept of labor and, in the process, coded work as masculine. Men still recognized that women labored, but they became “Servants” rather than members of the Lower Orders. While the Boston Trades’ Union had made a half-hearted attempt to forge alliances with female mill workers in Lowell and other towns, the organization had effectively eliminated Boston’s women from the city’s laboring community. Boston’s male laborers would partner with women and especially

¹³¹ A Working Woman of Boston, *The Aristocrat and Trades Union Advocate, A Colloquial Poem, Respectfully Dedicated to the Members of the Boston Trades Union and Vicinity* (Boston: Leonard W. Kimball, 1834), viii.

¹³² A Working Woman of Boston, *The Aristocrat and Trades Union Advocate*, x.

female mill workers in the 1840s, but for now they would be left out of the city's labor organization.

Although the Boston Trades' Union had done much to rally Boston's white male workers against the town's "aristocracy," the city's laborers had actually accomplished very little since the organization was founded. In May 1834, for instance, copperers struck for higher wages at the Charlestown Navy Yard while working on the U.S.S. *Constitution*, but BTU does not appear to have played any role in the economic protest.¹³³ Boston's laborers, with the support of the BTU, finally took direct action against upper class economic control in May 1835. At a meeting of house carpenters, masons, and stonecutters at Julien Hall, the assembly voted to enforce ten hours as a day's work. The group appointed a three-person committee, including BTU secretary Seth Luther, to write a pamphlet explaining the city's economic circumstances and their motivation in pursuing the ten-hour day for all of Boston's skilled and unskilled laborers.¹³⁴

Published roughly two weeks later in *The Man* and the *National Trades' Union*, the declaration became known nationally as the Ten-Hour, or Boston, Circular. The Circular argued that the Ten-Hour Movement was not just a push for better working conditions, but a "contest between Money and Labor" in which "Capital...is endeavoring to crush labor, the only source of all wealth." Arguing that their cause was an extension of the "Natural Rights of Man" and rightfully claimed "by the blood of our fathers, shed on our battle-fields in the War of the Revolution," the Circular warned workers to avoid false advertisements of temporary work or higher wages. Instead, Luther, Wood, and Abell urged workers to consider the forced degradation of their work and fight for the

¹³³ *The Man*, May 10, 1834.

¹³⁴ Kornblith, "From Artisans to Businessmen," 512.

rights of themselves and future generations. Distilling the labor struggle into conflict between workers and “Capitalists,” the Circular urged universal support from laborers who wished to “enroll your names on the scroll of history as the undaunted enemies of oppression, as the enemies of mental, moral, and physical degradation, as the friends of the human race.”¹³⁵

Despite the Circular’s radical tone, its message aligned with the core values expressed by the Boston Trades’ Union. The Circular stated that workers “would not be too severe on our employers, they are slaves to the Capitalists, as we are to them.”¹³⁶ Luther and his fellow authors gave voice to the decade of frustration felt by Boston’s laborers towards the city’s economic environment, but maintained that masters within the BTU similarly suffered under the influence of the Boston Associates. Maintaining their focus on inequality and Boston’s wealthy “aristocracy,” the Ten-Hour Circular distilled the arguments expressed by Boston’s laborers since the emergence of the Middling Interest.

With the publication of the Circular, the Journeymen Housewrights, Masons, and Stone Cutters initiated their strike for the ten-hour day. After a month of little progress, it became clear that the city’s journeymen had met the same resistance seen in 1825 and 1832. The Journeymen Housewrights convened in June and spoke in favor of further action that would “carry into effect the Ten Hour System of Labor.” Jethro Snow, a veteran of the 1825 carpenters strike, chaired the meeting and the group voted to continue

¹³⁵ Commons et al., eds., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Vol. 6, 94-99.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

the struggle despite stiff opposition.¹³⁷ According to the resolutions printed in the *Boston Weekly Reformer*, the newspaper was the only local paper willing to publish information on behalf of the housewrights, masons, or stonecutters. In addition, Boston's masters, whom journeymen had courted for several years through the Boston Trades' Union, failed to support the strike and continued to be "enemies to human happiness." Going forward, the journeymen encouraged every Boston laborer to "'take post' on the immutable ground of Equal rights" and instructed the City of Boston to "employ all those who do at the present time, or hereafter, may work, for the city, either in the capacity of mechanics, or laborers, on the 'TEN HOUR SYSTEM.'"¹³⁸

In July, the house carpenters, masons, and stonecutters challenged Boston's government to institute the ten-hour day by repeating a strategy from 1825. On July 4, a group of "qualified voters" handed a petition to the Mayor and Aldermen requesting a meeting at Faneuil Hall on July 13, to put to a vote the question of a ten-hour day for the city's laborers. The petitioners specified that these terms would be valid from March to September, and would include two hours for meals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Mayor and Aldermen backed the position taken by the city's merchants and manufacturers and rejected the petition. As one of the journeymen cynically joked to the *Boston Weekly Reformer*, the petition was declined "because it was signed principally by the hard hands of Mechanics, and requested some action respecting the removal of the burthen you suffer by excessive labor." Attempting to leverage their rights as citizens, Boston's laborers tried and failed to transform their struggle from an economic to a political issue.

¹³⁷ *Boston Weekly Reformer*, July 4, 1835. In 1825, Snow's name appeared on a petition rejected by the Mayor and Alderman in which the Journeymen House Carpenters Association of Boston sought use of the Grand Jury Room.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

As the summer dragged on, a group of plasterers joined the carpenters, masons, and stonecutters in their fight for the ten-hour day. Surprisingly, after only a few days, the employers granted this request and the plasterers returned to work.¹³⁹ Despite this small victory, the movement began to fail in early August. The *Weekly Reformer* reported on a rumor that some journeymen housewrights had returned to work and dismissed the story by claiming that the individuals had never been part of the ten-hour movement.¹⁴⁰ With most masters, merchants and manufacturers, the city government, and even the urban press opposing the Ten-Hour Movement, Boston's workers once again found themselves waging a losing battle. By November, the strike collapsed and the journeymen were forced "to acknowledge the defeat of our fondest wishes and our most ardent desires."¹⁴¹ After fighting for ten years against the town's aristocratic economic structure, Boston's laborers had made virtually no progress.

Ironically, the message and rhetoric of the Ten-Hour Circular, designed specifically to galvanize Boston's white male laboring population against the city's wealthy upper classes, failed in its local mission but inspired workers in other urban centers. In June, Philadelphia's laborers, under the leadership of John Ferral, had successfully struck for a ten-hour day. Ferral testified to Seth Luther, "It is an incontrovertible truth, that the movements of the useful classes here, are mainly to be attributed to the Circular." Upon observing the general walkout that had characterized the commitment of Philadelphia's laborers, Ferral believed that the one commonality between the workers was that "they had read and imbibed a portion of the pure spirit of

¹³⁹ *Boston Weekly Reformer*, August 8, 1835.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, Vol. 1, 389.

the Boston Circular.”¹⁴² As a call to action, the Boston Circular had been massively successful, but in the wrong locations. The ideology of the Ten-Hour Circular proved to be influential in combating economic disparity, but the Boston Associates controlled too much of Boston’s economic structure for it to upend the status quo.

In addition, the Boston Associates could not even claim that the defeat of the ten-hour day in Boston had prevented labor agitation from spreading to the mills at Lowell. Eight hundred women at Lowell struck against a wage reduction in February 1834 and turned out again in October 1836 when mill owners announced that they would raise the cost of living at boardinghouses.¹⁴³ In both instances, women formally organized, held meetings, signed petitions, and coordinated work stoppages in the manner that the NEA and the BTU had claimed was improper. As Thomas Dublin explains, women opposed the proposed changes because they “undermined the sense of dignity and social equality that was such an important element of their Yankee heritage” and “were seen as an attack on their economic independence.”¹⁴⁴ The Boston Associates had argued that Boston’s labor activism would spread like an infection to the Lowell mills and did everything in their power to ensure that the city’s strikes ended in defeat. The Associates had successfully stymied Boston’s laboring organizations and encouraged the continual decline of urban working conditions, but economic activism came to Lowell anyway.

In the following years, the failure of the Ten-Hour Circular and the 1835 strike pushed Boston’s laborers to further radicalize their ideology. In December 1835, for instance, a group of masters representing over fifty trades met at the Exchange Coffee

¹⁴² John Commons et al., eds., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Vol. 6, *Labour Movement*, 39-43.

¹⁴³ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 89-96.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

House and resolved to allow journeymen and manual laborers to break for their midday dinner an hour earlier than previously established. The decision only adjusted the existing schedule but the masters reported that they had been moved by a desire to govern their business with "true benevolence."¹⁴⁵ Laborers condemned the "secret cabal" and noted that the same masters stood against the ten-hour movement "as an unwarrantable interference with the established customs of the business community." Rather than seeing the meeting as a sign that masters might be willing to negotiate in the future, laborers saw the meeting as an excuse to unite and plan against future ten-hour strikes.¹⁴⁶ Having already established Boston's "aristocracy" as the enemy of labor, the failed strikes of 1835 convinced workers that it had been a mistake to court middle class employers in their organizations.

Some workers also began to argue that the conflation of politics and labor activism had proven to be a failure. The *Boston Weekly Reformer* clarified in August 1836 that the newspaper supported "the great body of the working men," but not the Working Man's Party. The *Reformer* argued that by supporting the party, laborers would have nothing to gain but the "privilege of having their veins sucked by a new and more hungry swarm of demagogues." The *Reformer* urged workers to turn away from middling and upper class politicians who sought to exploit them for votes and instead pursue direct action for what was right and just for laborers.¹⁴⁷

While many white, male laborers seemed prepared to focus on their own community in opposition to the upper and middling classes, others feared that the Ten Hour Movement had failed because of the gradual narrowing of their ranks. In an 1836

¹⁴⁵ *Boston Weekly Reformer*, December 26, 1835.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Boston Weekly Reformer*, August 9, 1836.

speech before a group of workers in Brooklyn, New York, Seth Luther lamented that he had been effectively cast out of the Boston labor movement. Luther believed that workers could be "ungrateful to those who are devoting their energies of their minds and wearing out their physical powers in their service." Having been unable to find results in the city's struggle for improved working conditions, Luther found his fellow organizers "quite shy of him" and believed he had been reduced in the eyes of Boston's workers.¹⁴⁸

Similarly, an anonymous worker, writing under the name "Grit," argued in the *Boston Weekly Reformer* that the Ten-Hour Movement had failed in Boston because of "the unfounded prejudices and petty jealousies, which exist among the working classes." In particular, the author pointed to "political and religious questions, and distinctions" that drove workers apart and prevented them uniting Boston's laboring population. By focusing only on like-minded male workers, the author believed that laborers would be unable to build the coalition necessary to overcome the resistance from middle and upper class Bostonians. According to Grit, only when laborers of all backgrounds embraced "faith in one another, and a perfect co-operation together," would they bring the ten-hour day to Boston.¹⁴⁹

* * *

By 1837, Boston's white male laborers found themselves stymied in their efforts to obtain the ten-hour day and correct the economic inequality that had characterized the city throughout much of the nineteenth century. After almost two decades of struggle, white male laborers had grown frustrated and radicalized by the total control wealthy

¹⁴⁸ Seth Luther, *An Address Delivered Before the Mechanics And Working-Men, Of the City of Brooklyn, On the Celebration of the Sixtieth Anniversary of American Independence, July 4, 1836* (Brooklyn: Alden Spooner and Sons, 1836), 21.

¹⁴⁹ *Boston Weekly Reformer*, December 26, 1836.

merchants and manufacturers held over the city's financial affairs. As white male laborers gained experience with political organizations through campaigning against debt reform and with the Middling Interest, they developed a concept of labor tied moral economic behavior drew upon republican concepts of citizenship and the legacy of the American Revolution. Reprising the fight against an economic aristocracy that their predecessors had waged in the eighteenth century, Boston's white male laborers sought to combat their slow decline into wage labor and evoke the radical Evangelicalism of the imperial crisis.

Antebellum laborers had also been willing to follow the example of eighteenth century laborers and work alongside middling Bostonians to counteract a powerful aristocracy, but the failed strikes of the 1820s and 1830s convinced nineteenth century laborers that their employers had become economic enemies as well. No longer willing to align themselves with any other social or economic group as potential allies, Boston's white male workers came to see their community engaged in the "continual warfare of honesty against fraud, weakness against power, and justice against oppression."¹⁵⁰ Ignored by both their employers and the city's ruling elites, Boston's white male laborers produced a radical laboring identity that helped bring its members closer together. Now described as the "Lower Orders," Boston's white, male, Protestant, and nativist workers defined itself in opposition to middle class employers and upper class capitalists.

Through the Middling Interest, the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics, and Other Working Men, and the Boston Trades' Union, Boston's white workers politicized economic inequality, challenged the primacy of Federalists and the Boston Associates, and sought to reverse the degradation of both skilled and unskilled

¹⁵⁰ Theophilus Fisk, *Capital Against Labor: An Address Delivered at Julien Hall, Before the Mechanics of Boston, On Wednesday Evening, May 20* (Boston: Daily Reformer Office, 1835), 3.

labor. By relying on their status as white men, however, laborers found themselves unable to create a coalition sufficiently powerful enough to challenge middle and upper class employers. Over the same time period, male laborers had ejected women, African Americans, and Irish immigrants from their concept of a laboring community.

Prioritizing race, religion, and gender as markers of their identity, white male workers had narrowed the possibilities of laboring collaboration and divided Boston's laboring population.

Chapter 5: “Most Troublesome to the Weaker Party”: Race and Religion in the Early Republic

In May 1836, the *Boston Mercantile Journal* described the progress of the Boston Port Society, a benevolent organization designed to assist the seamen and mariners of the port of Boston. Boasting of the Society’s success operating the Seamen’s Bethel in North Square, the *Journal* reported that the Society had reached hundreds of mariners through their sermons. Although the Boston Port Society’s Reverend Taylor reported that he had found some success in proselytizing among Boston’s seamen, he lamented that their condition “is deplorably low, and as a class they have been growing more and more degraded during a series of past years.” While the sailors’ spiritual health seemed to be improving, their economic stability continued to deteriorate. Taylor believed that he would be able to mitigate their spiritual suffering, but that a remedy for their financial woes would need to come from other parties.

The Boston Port Society put forward several reasons for this reduction in economic stability, including an exploitative employment system and the city’s boardinghouses. Both the *Journal* and the Boston Port Society, however, asserted that the root cause was “*the gradual and disproportionate increase among us of foreign, without an adequate and successive supply of native American seamen.*” The *Journal* argued that foreign-born mariners and laborers had pushed Boston sailors not only out of their jobs, but out of affordable housing as well.¹ Paying little attention to the shipping system and economic structure that seemed designed “to break down the spirits of the men,” the *Journal* advocated for restrictions that would prevent immigrants from competing with Boston’s workers.

¹ *Boston Mercantile Journal*, May 21, 1836.

As Boston once again established itself as a nexus of New England commerce in the decades following the American Revolution, the city's laboring community resisted the degradation of work and a decline in their economic status. In the early Republic and the antebellum era, workers struggled against their employers and the city's "aristocrats" and espoused a laboring identity that emphasized masculinity and citizenship. Male workers organized around these principles to challenge the town's political and economic leadership and in the process marginalized women workers and removed them from their conception of the laboring community. Over the same period, male workers began to turn on other groups in response to increased job competition, new demographic patterns, and altered social structures. Endorsing and promoting new ideologies concerning race, nativism, and religion, Boston's white male workers targeted African Americans and Irish Catholic immigrants and ejected them from the laboring community. Through violence and intimidation, white workers defined themselves in opposition of these groups and eliminated any short-term possibility of forging an inclusive laboring coalition.

* * *

As Boston moved into the nineteenth century, the town suffered through two economic recessions in the 1780s and 1800s amidst dramatic population growth. By 1800, Boston had become home to 25,000 inhabitants, half of whom had no previous ties to the town.² Ten years later, the town's population continued to bloom and would reach 33,250.³ Even before this dramatic growth, the influx of rural migrants into Boston led individuals like James Bowdoin to remark that he would "scarcely see any other than new

² Carr-Frobose, "A Cultural History of Boston in the Revolutionary Era," 147.

³ Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, 15.

faces...so great were the changes."⁴ This explosive growth, after decades of stagnation, brought an end to the relatively self-contained community that had characterized the early colonial era. In place of personal patronage and social and cultural bonds, Boston grew into a society of strangers competing for economic resources and social standing. Rural white laborers, free African Americans from other New England towns, and European immigrants brought new cultural perceptions to Boston. As new arrivals, these groups triggered fears among the existing population that the town was growing too quickly and would lose its familiar character. Seeking ways in which to process their new environment, Bostonians, rich and poor, took measures to assert order on a chaotic urban landscape.

Boston officials sought to exert a measure of control over this demographic shift by reviving the colonial practice of "warning out." Used by towns throughout early colonial New England, warning out enabled officials to force "strangers" to leave their towns and prevent them from obtaining public services. The practice relied upon the premise that individuals could be considered part of a community only if the community first accepted them. Strangers to a community could only obtain residency through birth, relation to existing residents, a vote at the town meeting, selectmen approval, or the purchase of an estate or property above a certain value.⁵ While selectmen applied these standards to all strangers, the standards for residency favored more affluent individuals and placed workers in danger of being warned out. Without the proper personal connections or economic resources, recently arrived laborers faced the constant threat of expulsion by Boston officials.

⁴ Carr-Frobose, "A Cultural History of Boston in the Revolutionary Era," 146.

⁵ Carr, *After the Siege*, 99.

Boston turned to warning out as a way to slow the growing level of poverty caused by the Boston Port Act and the siege of Boston. Officials considered forcing inhabitants from the town as early as 1777 in response to limited supplies of food, a harsh winter, and a large volume of homeless refugees seeking shelter and public assistance.⁶ The destitute newcomers placed additional burden on an already overtaxed public relief system that had been unable to keep up with demand for alms throughout much of the eighteenth century. The town had already spent a significant portion of its entire budget on poor relief and in the decades following the siege, this percentage only increased. As Boston's population continued to grow faster than its economy could support even its existing residents, officials even took on debt in order to provide the resources necessary to cope with demand.⁷

In 1821, for instance, the Overseers of the Poor explained that the Boston Almshouse possessed thirty-six rooms that, at most, should hold eight to ten persons each. According to the report submitted to Mayor Josiah Quincy, "some of these rooms have been, in some winters, *crowded to nearly double that number*" to cope with seasonal unemployment.⁸ Temporary stays in the Almshouse became a regular survival strategy for Boston's laboring community, especially as employers forced the creation of a large, unskilled, and highly competitive wage labor pool. With the Overseers of the Poor already unable to provide for the existing laboring community, officials believed they had little choice but to reduce the laboring population, categorize newcomers as "strangers," and ensure that government resources only went to local residents.

⁶ Carr, *After the Siege*, 98.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁸ Josiah Quincy, *A Municipal History of the Town and City of Boston During Two Centuries from September 17, 1630 to September 17, 1830* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1852), 36.

Between November 1791 and February 1792, Boston officials expelled 2,200 men, women, and children from the town.⁹ Although officials ostensibly acted to assist Boston's laboring community, they also warned out laboring individuals who they deemed "undesirable." During this purge, for instance, officials warned out more than one hundred adults who had claimed residency in Boston since the early 1780s.¹⁰ Twelve of these one hundred individuals were African American men and women. In the four-month period, Boston selectmen used warning out to remove eighty-three African Americans, a decision that appears to have been planned several years prior.¹¹ In July 1788, the Board of Selectmen had directed police inspectors to "take an account of all the Negroes not Inhabitants of this Town, governing themselves by the late Law relative to Negroes." Since the selectmen did not warn out this group of African Americans in 1788, it is likely that the list informed the process in the early 1790s.

As Jacqueline Carr-Frobose explains, Boston selectmen targeted African Americans as well as other groups deemed "outsiders" in a failed attempt to preserve the town's early colonial contours. Compared to Philadelphia and New York, eighteenth century travelers perceived of Boston as a relatively static and self-contained entity that identified itself as distinct from even the rest of New England. In the words of Oscar Handlin, Boston had "no room for strangers; its atmosphere of cultural homogeneity, familiar and comforting to self-contained Bostonians, seemed rigidly forbidding to aliens."¹² Both upper class leaders, who believed they held influence over the town, and laborers, who had built their community around personal connections and shared cultural

⁹ Carr, *After the Siege*, 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Carr-Frobose, "A Cultural History of Boston in the Revolutionary Era," 275.

¹² *Ibid.*, 274.

values, preferred this structure and approved of the warning out system as a way of maintaining control over their environment. In addition to targeting African Americans, Boston's selectmen ousted 360 foreign-born immigrants, who constituted seventeen percent of those warned out in 1791 and 1792.¹³ White laborers likely approved of these measures because they singled out workers coded as "outsiders" in regard to their social and cultural norms and helped ensure that alms relief went to those they counted as part of the laboring community. Specifically using categories of race and ethnicity to identify "strangers," Boston officials targeted non-whites and non-natives as undesirable inhabitants.

While Boston officials warned out both black and white laborers in an effort to control the flow of people into the town, selectmen used additional legal powers to justify their targeting of African Americans. In particular, officials leveraged the power granted to them by the 1788 "Act for Suppressing and Punishing of Rogues, Vagabonds, common Beggars, and other idle, disorderly and lewd Persons." While much of the law focused on runaway apprentices and criminals, the Massachusetts General Court included a specific statute concerning African Americans. The law specified that:

No person, being an African or Negro, other than a subject of the Emperor of *Morocco*, or a citizen of some one of the United States (to be evidenced by a certificate from the Secretary of State of which he shall be a citizen) shall tarry within this Commonwealth for a longer time than two months; and...upon complaint and proof made that such person has continued within this Commonwealth ten days after notice given him or her to depart as aforesaid, shall commit the said person to any house of correction within the county, there to be kept to hard labour agreeably to the rules and orders of the said house...¹⁴

¹³ Carr-Frobose, "A Cultural History of Boston in the Revolutionary Era," 274.

¹⁴ Massachusetts General Court, *The Perpetual Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, from the Establishment of Its Constitution in the Year 1780 to the End of the Year 1800: With the Constitutions of the United States of America, and Commonwealth, Prefixed. To Which Is Added, an Appendix, Containing Acts and Clauses of Acts, from the Laws of the Late Colony, Province and State of Massachusetts, Which Either Are Unrevised or Respect the Title of Real Estate. In Three Volumes* (Boston: I. Thomas and E.T. Andrews, 1801), 1:413.

The law allowed the state of Massachusetts, as well as officials within its urban and rural towns, to expel any African Americans that could not prove their state citizenship. The statute exempted African American citizens of other states and Moroccans. After Morocco had been the first country to acknowledge American independence in 1777, the two nations signed a Treaty of Friendship to solidify relations in 1786.¹⁵ With both exceptions, Massachusetts sought to ensure that domestic and international commercial partners would not subject to warning out if they remained in Boston on business.

Legislators designed and used the law to discourage the influx of free blacks and runaway slaves that sought refuge in Boston after the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled slavery unconstitutional. In neighboring Connecticut, where a 1784 gradual emancipation statute stipulated that African Americans born into slavery remained so until their twenty-first birthday, runaway slaves pivoted away from New York City and towards Boston in direct response to Massachusetts's Supreme Court ruling.¹⁶ As Boston moved into the nineteenth century, abolitionism and the increased restrictions on free blacks in southern states would further encourage free and enslaved African Americans to seek refuge in the city. Through the press and word of mouth, African Americans came to associate Massachusetts with some degree of progressive legal equality.

In his mid-nineteenth century autobiography, for instance, former Connecticut slave James Mars argued that New England African Americans recognized the opportunities and rights offered by Massachusetts after judicial emancipation. Mars moved from Connecticut to Massachusetts to "show that I have the principles of a man,

¹⁵ Priscilla H. Roberts and James N. Tull, "Moroccan Sultan Sidi Muhammad Ibn Abdallah's Diplomatic Initiatives toward the United States, 1777-1786," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 143, no. 2 (Jun., 1999): 249.

¹⁶ Christopher Sawula, "'He Cannot Assert Any Excuse for Running Away': Connecticut Runaway Advertisements, 1757-1788," (unpublished manuscript, October 1, 2009), Microsoft Word file.

and act like a man, and vote like a man, but not in my native State; I cannot do it there, must remove to the old Bay State for the right to be a man."¹⁷ Through warning out and the 1788 "Act for Suppressing and Punishing of Rogues," state and local officials effectively sought to reverse this perception, make Massachusetts less hospitable to migrating African Americans, and prevent them from settling and working in urban centers like Boston.

Despite these efforts, Boston's African American population continued to grow in the years following judicial emancipation. Between 1790 and 1800, Boston's African American population increased approximately fifty-three percent to 1,174.¹⁸ As more African Americans came to call Boston home, they became targets for legal and extralegal discrimination. Likely in response to the influx of African Americans, Boston selectmen in 1800 used the 1788 law to warn out 239 African Americans, a figure that accounted for almost one quarter of all adult African Americans in the town.¹⁹ Although most of those targeted qualified as strangers and could be warned out, the renewed attempt demonstrated the extent to which town officials sought to keep the black population as low as possible. Under constant surveillance and threat of eviction, Boston's African Americans persevered and found work in laboring occupations and housing in less expensive and less settled neighborhoods. African Americans like barber Joseph Pinnell, Briton Brown, and George Roberson could be found in the crowded homes and tenements of the North End, but the bulk of African American families resided in the South End around Fort Hill and in the West End around Southack Street

¹⁷ James Mars, *Life of James Mars, a Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut* (Hartford: Press of Case, Lockwood, & Company, 1868), 38.

¹⁸ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 83.

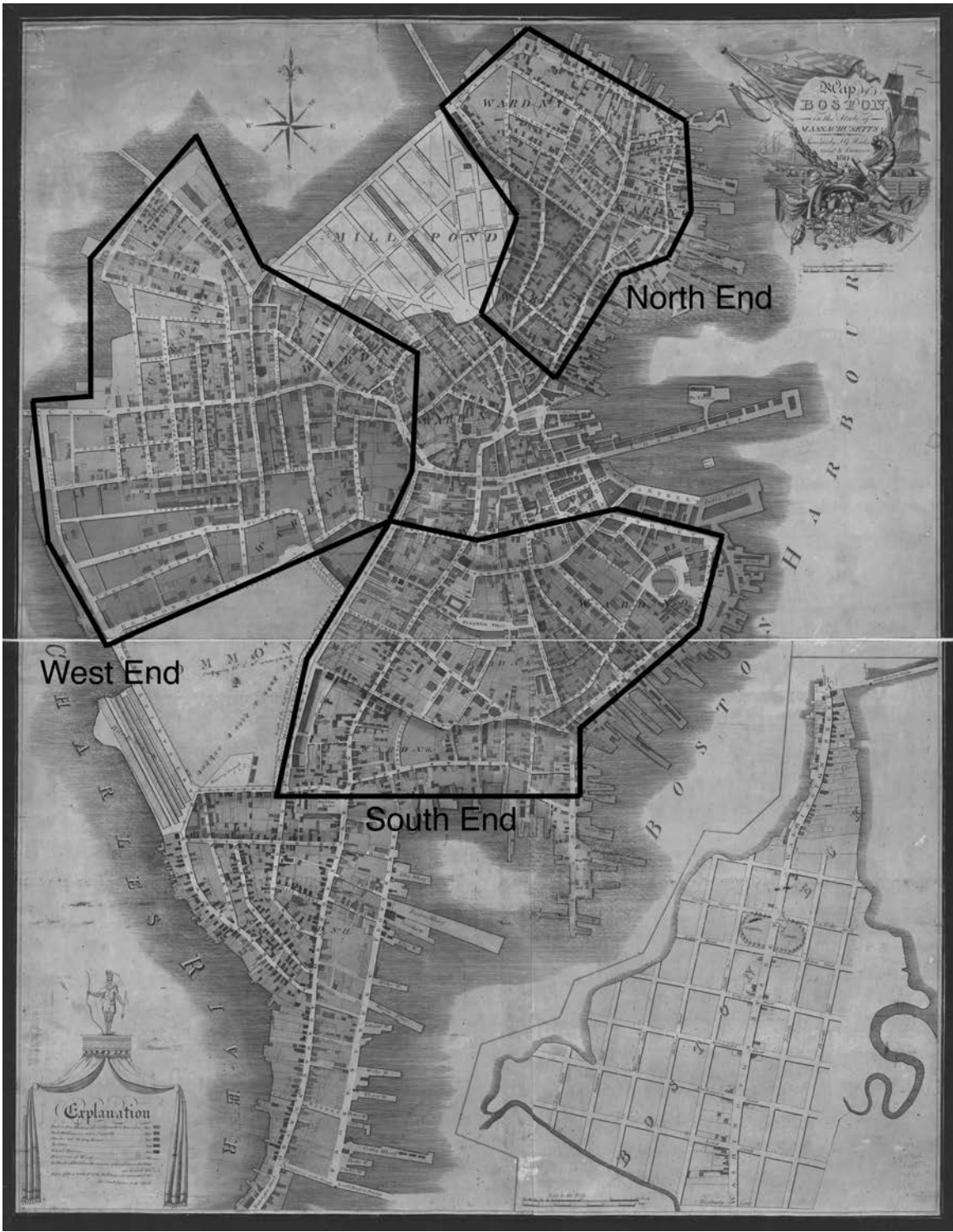
¹⁹ Carr, *After the Siege*, 77; Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America*, 85.

during this period.²⁰ In 1794, sixty percent of the town's African Americans lived in the South End, twenty percent in the West End, and twenty percent in the North End.

While the South End's black population remained relatively stable through the end of the eighteenth century, the North and West Ends experienced a dramatic shift between 1794 and 1799. In the intervening five years, African Americans virtually evacuated the North End and began concentrating in the West End. By 1800, the West End accounted for thirty-five percent of the town's African American population, while the North End could claim only five percent. Between the American Revolution and the turn of the nineteenth century, African Americans found themselves evicted from the laboring North End.

This sudden change grew out of a series of push and pull factors within Boston's laboring community. Boston's African Americans gravitated towards the South and West End neighborhoods due to the jobs that were available to black laborers. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Boston's black workers worked primarily as domestic servants and unskilled laborers. Especially as Boston's more affluent white residents began to relocate to the West End, African Americans followed this migration to work in these wealthy households. In addition, the construction of both upper and middling homes in the South End provided valuable opportunities for African American laborers to obtain steady work throughout the 1780s and 1790s. Taken together, the ability to find inexpensive housing and pursue economic opportunity in the South and West Ends of Boston helps explain why by 1799, ninety-five percent of Boston's African Americans resided in either the South or West.

²⁰ Taking Book 1790, Boston Town Records, Boston Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston, Massachusetts.



An 1814 map of Boston depicting the North End, South End, and West End neighborhoods. Map originally by J. G. Hales, (Boston: 1814), Library of Congress.

These pull factors, however, do not fully account for why Boston's African American population virtually abandoned the North End of the town by 1800. As middling and upper class Bostonians fled the town's oldest neighborhood, the town's white laborers pushed out African Americans and transformed the North End into their own enclave. Boston's white workers eliminated African Americans from the laboring community and subsequently forced them out of the traditionally laboring section of town. Over roughly twenty-five years, Boston's white laborers came to emphasize the concepts of racial difference that been simmering in the eighteenth century and used categories of race to blame African Americans for economic competition and downward social mobility.

In the years following judicial emancipation, Boston's white laborers rapidly widened the racial divide that had been a constant presence within the laboring community. Boston's black and white workers had been able to come together in crowd actions and moments of multiracial solidarity against a common enemy, but ideas of racial inferiority, common to virtually all white Bostonians, ensured that white colonial workers did not view slaves or free blacks as social or cultural equals. White hostility towards African Americans had worsened in the 1770s as the town's slave population publicly declared their willingness to support the British military in exchange for their freedom. Although Boston's free black population remained largely loyal to the Patriot cause, white Bostonians effectively ignored and postponed the needs of African Americans in order to concentrate on resisting British authority and hierarchy. After the Revolutionary War, the Supreme Judicial Court's decision on judicial emancipation placed the spotlight on Boston's free black population.

As the eighteenth century came to a close, growing economic pressures on Boston's laboring community exacerbated racial tensions. In the 1790s, John Adams believed that the financial concerns of struggling laborers contributed to this more virulent and overt racism. Adams believed that the laborers' assault against slavery stemmed from the belief that free labor could not compete with unpaid labor. After decades of economic stagnation, compounded by the devastation caused by the siege of Boston, workers "would not suffer, the Labour by which alone they could obtain a subsistence to be done by Slaves."²¹ In Adams's eyes, white workers had always considered themselves superior, but new economic changes prompted the split between black and white workers.

In the wake of judicial emancipation, the concern with enslaved competition appears to have transferred to free African Americans. As Joanne Pope Melish explains, former slave owners and other whites throughout New England did everything in their power to ensure that the social and legal structures that had categorized slaves as inferior and dependent applied to free African Americans.²² In some instances, Massachusetts slaveholders maintained a slave's status even after judicial emancipation through legal loopholes. In 1789, for instance, John Ashley Jr. of Sheffield, Massachusetts purchased a slave in New York, brought her into Massachusetts, and immediately forced her to sign a ten-year indenture. Knowing that the slave would earn her freedom as soon as she arrived in Massachusetts, John Ashley forced her to sign the indenture agreement and continue her unpaid labor for an additional decade.²³ Whites also bound African American

²¹ John Adams to Jeremy Belknap, 21 March 1795, Jeremy Belknap Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

²² Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 97.

²³ *Ibid.*, 96.

children into long apprenticeships or indentures, selling them to other masters in a manner very similar to slavery.²⁴ The white belief that free African Americans could still be treated as unpaid property helped ensure that the economic fear of slave labor in the eighteenth century would transfer to free black labor in the nineteenth century.

In the early nineteenth century, these economic concerns were compounded by Boston's rapid population growth and subsequent job competition. As black and white laborers arrived and settled in Boston, they joined an already competitive labor market that had just begun to recover from the Revolutionary War. Even as Boston returned to regional prominence, the bastard artisan system and overall push to transform skilled and unskilled workers into daily wage laborers placed the laboring community in an extremely precarious economic environment.

Without reliable housing, work, or personal connections, newly arrived black and white workers ran the risk of being designated strangers and warned out of the community. In the quarter century following the American Revolution, Boston's construction and maritime industries boomed, two sectors in which unskilled laborers could most commonly find regular work. As a result, free African Americans and recently arrived white laborers found themselves seeking the same jobs on wharves and construction sites. As African Americans were largely barred from skilled and industrial work, the degradation of labor prompted many white workers to compete or work alongside African Americans for the first time.

In addition, the degradation of skilled and unskilled labor reduced the social and economic mobility of Boston's white laborers and brought them closer to the already marginalized social status of African Americans. In the early colonial era, white workers

²⁴ Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 101.

had included African Americans within the laboring community as long as whites could assert their superiority within the social and racial hierarchy. Regardless of economic instability and financial hardship, white workers could draw solace from the recognition that they were not slaves and retained their basic freedom.²⁵ In the words of David Roediger, workers in both the eighteenth in nineteenth century needed “a wretched touchstone against which to measure their fears of unfreedom and a friendly reminder that they were by comparison not so badly off.”²⁶ While southern slavery still provided this comparison in the nineteenth century, the degradation of labor and the presence of free African Americans made it harder for white workers to delineate their social and economic superiority.

As Leslie Harris explains, the jobs filled by free African Americans in the early nineteenth-century urban North, including “domestic work, chimney sweeping, sailing, and waitering, represented symbolically and literally the worst fates that could befall white workers.”²⁷ As white laborers found themselves competing for these jobs in the early republic, they sought to restrict African American access to these types of positions. The white desire to set themselves apart from free African Americans also helps explain why black Bostonians relocated to the South and West End when the town’s trade and shipbuilding industries were concentrated along the North End wharves. Like their upper class brethren who used warning out to influence the contours of Boston’s community, white workers took measures to eject African Americans from the town’s laboring community.

²⁵ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery*, 100.

As early as the 1790s, upper class Bostonians recognized that social and economic pressures within the laboring community had exacerbated long-simmering racial tensions. In 1795, for instance, Jeremy Belknap addressed the relationship between whites and African Americans in his correspondence with Virginia judge St. George Tucker. Tucker had posed a series of questions to Belknap on race and slavery in the North and, unable to sufficiently answer the questions on his own, Belknap solicited the assistance of several prominent Bostonians. In his own response, Belknap claimed genteel Bostonians treated African Americans "as other persons of the same standing," and placed the blame for Boston's racism squarely on white laborers:

I am not sensible of any want of harmony in general between persons of different colours, merely on account of that difference. People of loose and debauched characters, and ungovernable passions, especially when they meet at bad houses, fall into disagreements and quarrels.²⁸

Although Belknap claimed to be ignorant of the growing racism within the town, he intimated that disorderly houses, previously sites where many white and black laborers had congregated to collectively drink and engage in illicit activities, had become locations where white and black workers now regularly fought. Boston's white laborers had begun regulating these illegal establishments in order to prevent African Americans from visiting these traditionally laboring spaces. The quarrels described by Jeremy Belknap suggest that after decades of sharing these private spaces, white laborers no longer wished to fraternize or drink with black Bostonians. Drawing upon the tradition of social policing that had characterized many small riots throughout the eighteenth century, Boston's white workers employed violence in order to enforce the growing racial

²⁸ Jeremy Belknap, "Queries Respecting the Slavery and Emancipation of Negroes in Massachusetts, Proposed by Hon. Judge Tucker of Virginia, and Answered by Rev. Dr. Belknap, *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Series 1, Vol. 4 (Boston: 1835), 210.

divide.²⁹ With the racial split between black and white workers widening, African Americans joined their brethren in other urban centers and opened their own disorderly houses to black laborers.³⁰ No longer welcome at illegal taverns run by white workers, African Americans had no choice but to run their own.

After admitting that he did not have enough personal interaction with Boston's laboring community to form an informed opinion on racial tensions, Belknap solicited the assistance of other leading Boston figures. This included free African American Prince Hall, who offered a diplomatic response regarding relations between black and white Bostonians:

Harmony in general prevails between us as citizens, for the good law of the land does oblige every one to live peaceably with all his fellow citizens, let them be black or white. We stand on a level, therefore no pre-eminence can be claimed on either side. As to our associating there is here a great number of worthy good men and good citizens, that are not ashamed to take an African by the hand; but yet there are to be seen the weeds of pride, envy, tyranny, and scorn, in this garden of peace, liberty and equality.³¹

As the excerpt indicates, Hall believed that while the law mandated equality, individuals within the Boston community sought to establish "tyranny" over African Americans. Born into slavery in 1735 and manumitted in 1770, Prince Hall was intimately aware of the growing hostility between white and black laborers. In 1775, Prince Hall and fourteen other free African Americans were initiated into the Freemasons by a group of Irish soldiers within the British regiment stationed on Bunker Hill. Having established a provisional chapter for African American Freemasons, Prince Hall and the other black Freemasons spent nine years attempting to obtain a permanent charter, only to be denied by white Freemasons throughout Massachusetts. Subsequently, Hall traveled to England

²⁹ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 82.

³⁰ Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 104.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

in 1784, obtained a permanent charter from the Grand Lodge of England, and opened the African Grand Lodge for the state's African American Masons.³²

Fifteen years after obtaining the charter, Hall elaborated on the relationship between black and white laborers in a speech in Menotomy, Massachusetts. Describing the humiliating attacks suffered by the town's African Americans, Hall placed the blame squarely on the town's white workers:

Patience, I say, for were we not possess'd of a great measure of it you could not bear up under the daily insults you meet with in the streets of Boston; much more on public days of recreation, how are you shamefully abus'd, and that at such a degree, that you may truly be said to carry your lives in your hands; and the arrows of death are flying about your heads; helpless old women have their clothes torn off their backs, even to the exposing of their nakedness; and by whom are these disgraceful and abusive actions committed, not by the men born and bred in Boston, for they are better bred; but by a mob or horde of shameless, low-lived, envious, spiteful persons, some of them not long since servants in gentlemen's kitchens, scouring knives, tending horses, and driving chaise.³³

Hall's speech reveals that white laborers engaged in daily harassment that went largely ignored by Belknap and other upper class whites. Hall drew a careful distinction between "better bred" Bostonians and the white laborers who attacked their African Americans. Described as the "weeds of pride, envy, tyranny, and scorn" in his response to Belknap, Hall railed against these "low-lived, envious, spiteful persons" for inflicting racialized violence upon African Americans on a daily basis.

Hall also revealed that African Americans came under particular assault during public holidays and "days of recreation." According to historians like Leslie Harris and Shane White, white northerners took specific measures in the wake of emancipation to restrict the ability of African Americans to demonstrate and celebrate in public spaces. In

³² Maurice Wallace, "'Are We Men?': Prince Hall, Martin Delany, and the Masculine Ideal in Black Freemasonry, 1775-1865," *American Literary History* 9, no. 3 (October 1, 1997): 397.

³³ Prince Hall, *A Charge Delivered to the African Lodge, June 24, 1797, at Menotomy, Mass.*, (Boston: 1797), 10.

Albany, for instance, officials effectively banned Pinkster in 1811 by forbidding booths, tents, gambling, dancing, and parading on the days upon which the holiday usually fell.³⁴ After more than one hundred years of the holiday, which had transformed from a Dutch celebration of Spring into a festival infused with African rituals and influences, Albany's white residents unceremoniously called for its prohibition.³⁵ According to Shane White, the law coincided with a larger campaign to remove visible aspects of laboring cultural traditions in order to please the white middle class.³⁶ As a holiday that still exhibited signs of misrule and social inversion, upper and middle class whites targeted Pinkster and in the process prevented African Americans from holding their own celebrations.

Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Boston officials took additional steps against African Americans that encouraged white laborers in their racist beliefs. As Joanne Pope Melish explains, wealthy white New Englanders spent the decades following the American Revolution offering prescriptions for how free African Americans were supposed to act. Middle and upper class reformers argued that African Americans could live up to their free status through “usefulness, controlled sexuality, public and private passivity and invisibility—in other words, behavior appropriate to well-disciplined slaves.”³⁷ As members of Boston's laboring community, however, free African Americans were much more likely to display the rowdy, coarse, uncontrolled behavior expressed by workers throughout the early colonial era. As a result, middling and upper class Bostonians came to associate free people of color with “disorder” and

³⁴ White, *Somewhat More Independent*, 101.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁷ Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 123.

deemed them in need of supervision and guidance from white officials.³⁸ Despite sharing the same cultural norms as part of the laboring community, white Bostonians associated African American behavior with dependence while white laborers considered their own actions to be signs of their independent spirit. Upper class reformers expressed their prejudice by singling out the free black population as a group in need of reform. Driven by similar racist impulses and justifications, Boston's upper classes regulated the lives of African Americans and fostered Boston's culture of white supremacy.

In the name of reform, Boston officials inhibited the development of African American institutions, encouraged segregation, and instituted policy measures to reduce black Bostonians to second-class citizens. Town officials, for instance, placed special requirements on African Americans that restricted their ability to freely congregate and worship throughout the 1780s and 1790s. In 1789, a group of black Bostonians requested use of Faneuil Hall for a sermon from a recently arrived African American preacher. The Board of Selectmen approved the request, but required "it be on a Week Day, & that the service begins at 3 o'Clock or a little after so as the People may have the Hall by Day light that no opportunity may be given rude Fellows to make a disturbance."³⁹ Later petitions for nearby schoolhouses were met with similar limitations. Selectmen denied a group of African Americans use of one schoolhouse because "it would be out of the usual hours for public Worship," but granted them use of another as long as it was used for the afternoon service.⁴⁰ The limits on time suggest that the town's selectmen were influenced

³⁸ Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 132.

³⁹ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes from 1787 Through 1798* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1896), 82. Notably, the phrasing of these requirements suggests that the selectmen were worried not about the African American community, but believed white laborers might use the occasion for public violence.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

both by their distrust of African Americans as well as their fear of disorderly white workers. Boston's selectmen understood that white workers would seize any opportunity to harass African Americans, but the policy mirrored early colonial laws that restricted the movement and privacy of slaves. Seeking both to deny equal rights to African Americans and protect them from white workers, Boston officials regulated the daily lives of African Americans and encouraged white Bostonians to see them as socially inferior.

Middling and upper class officials could claim they were protecting African Americans from white laborers because of how white workers acted out their racial beliefs. Whereas Boston's officials employed legal restrictions, laborers discriminated against black Bostonians through physical violence. In New York City, for instance, African Americans found themselves targeted by city officials but also struggled with harassment employed specifically by white laborers. By the 1820s, for instance, African Americans had shifted from celebrating Emancipation Day on July 4 to July 5 in response to the fear "that whites, celebrating drunkenly on the fourth, would be more likely to attack blacks in the streets."⁴¹ Since the turn of the nineteenth century, the New York Manumission Society had requested that African Americans stop celebrating Emancipation Day altogether for their own safety and only after two decades of abuse did the city's black population begin to withdraw from public displays. One African American observer asked why the black community persisted with processions during public days of celebration when they have "a tendency to injure us, by exciting prejudice and making the public believe we care for nothing so much as show?"⁴² After many

⁴¹ Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 123.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 125.

African Americans lost the ability to vote in New York after the state's legislature raised property requirements in 1826, many white laborers found themselves able to claim citizenship while simultaneously denying the same rights to black workers. As Prince Hall's speech demonstrates, Boston's white workers acted in a similar manner to constantly harass the town's African American population and deny their right to appear in public on holidays and in public processions.

White Bostonians justified their racist regulations through an appropriation of Revolutionary rhetoric. In his letter to Jeremy Belknap, Reverend John Eliot observed that middling Freemasons had altered the understanding that the Declaration of Independence and the Massachusetts constitution to justify placing themselves above free African Americans. According to Eliot, the town's white Freemasons refused to conform to the Masonic belief that all free men were equal because "they are ashamed of being on an equality with Blacks." Subsequently, black Freemasons "neither avowedly nor tacitly...admit the preheminance [sic] of the Whites; But as evident that the preheminance is claimed by the Whites."⁴³ Both black and white workers recognized that the 1780 Massachusetts constitution declared both groups equal, but most white Bostonians refused to allow this equality to be put into everyday practice.

Thomas Pemberton and Edward Holyoke added to Eliot's insight by including all white laborers alongside Freemasons. Holyoke believed that Boston's white workers "sometimes associate with them; but I believe they generally consider it as an Act of

⁴³ John Eliot to Jeremy Belknap, February 1795, Jeremy Belknap Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

Condescension."⁴⁴ Similarly, Pemberton singled out white laborers for their insistence on a racial hierarchy:

The Colour'd people here demean themselves as orderly as might be expected, and are civilly treated by the Whites who employ them & pay them wages for their services, but there is a distinction between the Whites and Blacks. The former are tenacious of their Superiority, & it is rare for them to associate and mix together in company whenever this happens, the whites are of the lower class of citizens. It is more rare for intermarriages to take place between them; very few instances of such connections can be found.⁴⁵

In all three instances, the correspondents described a sense of racial superiority that white laborers used to justify their violent abuse of African Americans. Whereas previously Boston's early colonial upper classes had lumped white workers and African Americans together as part of the lower or meaner sort, nineteenth century elites now recognized that white laborers were overtly espousing concepts of white supremacy. By insisting on racial superiority, Boston's white workers claimed social and economic equality alongside middling and upper class Bostonians while denying the same privileges to African Americans. Sharing racist beliefs with middling and upper class Bostonians but imposing them through harassment and abuse, white laborers reframed Revolutionary ideology in order to defend their actions as they sought to shore up their eroding economic status.

In doing so, white laborers continued the process in which they defined their position within Boston's economy by claiming their rights as enfranchised citizens. Boston's white workers used electioneering and political organizations in an attempt to elevate themselves within the public sphere and challenge the primacy of upper class

⁴⁴ Edward A. Holyoke to Jeremy Belknap, 19 March 1795, Jeremy Belknap Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁴⁵ Thomas Pemberton to Jeremy Belknap, 12 March 1795, Jeremy Belknap Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

merchants and politicians. As they defined themselves as citizens, white workers sought to invalidate similar claims by African Americans. As David Roediger explains, white laborers equated blackness with “anticitizenship” and mapped the dependency and perceived inferiority of slaves onto free African Americans.⁴⁶ In the decades following the American Revolution, Boston’s white workers embraced the racist ideology that reflected the national turn towards “*herrenvolk* republicanism.” White workers recognized that upper class economic and political elites had pushed them into daily wage labor and degraded their status, but found it was easier to blame African Americans for economic competition than it was to overturn the new urban aristocracy. White workers continued to use demonstrations and crowd actions against the middle and upper class Bostonians, but laborers most often took out their frustration on African Americans through violence and constant harassment. In doing so, white workers pushed African Americans out of the laboring community and encourage the nineteenth century relocation of black Bostonians from the North End to the West End.

Faced with everyday harassment and restrictive legal policies, the town's African American community responded by challenging white discrimination and claiming the equality enshrined in the state's constitution. In response to the restrictions on black funerals and the lack of adequate poor relief, forty-two African Americans founded the African Humane Society in 1796. In 1805, the African Baptist Church opened its doors for the first time and ensured that the town's black population would not need to rely on the town's selectmen for permission to hold religious services or public meetings. African Americans also established a school for black children in 1798 in the home of Primus

⁴⁶ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 57; Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 110.

Hall. After enrollment grew too big for the space, the school relocated to the African Baptist Church.⁴⁷

Pushed out of the laboring community by white workers, Boston's African Americans established their own organizations to counteract systemic discrimination. Centered on the African Baptist Church and the African Masonic Lodge, these institutions provided locations where African Americans could come together and escape white abuse. Especially as Boston's white workers forced African Americans out of the laboring neighborhoods in the North End, the African Baptist Church on Belknap Street in the West End would encourage black laborers to migrate towards the West End and form a racially delineated enclave. Social and geographically divorced from white laborers, African Americans relied on their own resources to develop a coherent community.

Divorced from white laborers, African Americans relied on their own resources to support one another and persevere within a hostile environment. As the nineteenth century progressed, the presence of the African Baptist Church, the African Lodge, and the Primus Hall school helped Boston's African Americans maintain an identity and develop their own community traditions. By 1828, Boston became home to three "African" churches, which outpaced the growth of Catholicism in the city and reflected the desire by African Americans for institutions of their own.⁴⁸ As the free black population moved beyond the initial emancipated generation, they also began to develop class distinctions within their own neighborhoods. Although it would take until the 1830s and 1840s for an African American middle class to fully emerge, some black families

⁴⁷ Carr, *After the Siege*, 79.

⁴⁸ *Freedom's Journal*, February 22, 1828.

managed to gain economic and social status and become leaders within the community. By 1842, for instance, 256 African American men appeared in the city directory, primarily including mariners, laborers, and waiters. While this glimpse into African American occupations reflected the jobs free black workers had been relegated to throughout the nineteenth century, the directory also included eight boarding house owners, three musicians, nine mechanics, two ministers, and one physician.⁴⁹ White workers attempted to prevent African Americans from competing with white tradesmen and shop owners, but African Americans continued to make their place in the city and fight on the black community's behalf.

This included individuals like William G. Nell, who acted as a community organizer throughout the 1820s and helped found the Massachusetts General Colored Association. Nell's son, William Cooper Nell, would distinguish himself as a writer and public speaker, earn a position as an apprentice at the printing office of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, and become an integrationist leader within the free black community.⁵⁰ Whereas Nell and many other African American reformers worked towards abolition and social and economic equality with white Bostonians, other African Americans believed that only general resistance by free blacks and slaves would allow them to escape racial discrimination and segregation. David Walker, a North Carolinian who moved to Boston in the 1820s, ultimately came to embrace the latter strategy. After his arrival into the city, Walker opened a clothing store, became the local agent for the nation's first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, and participated in the

⁴⁹ George A. Levesque, *Black Boston: African American Life and Culture in Urban America, 1750-1860* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 116.

⁵⁰ Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 62.

black community by joining the African Masonic Lodge, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Massachusetts General Colored Association (MGCA).⁵¹

By 1828, David Walker had risen high enough in the African American community to give a speech before the MGCA, which he expanded in 1829 as the *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Walker refuted the racist belief among white Americans that African Americans were innately inferior and asserted that free blacks needed to take direct action to prove their worth as equals and citizens. Walker also challenged the assertion held by many of Boston's whites that the Declaration of Independence and the Massachusetts state constitution did not apply to African Americans by simply asking, "Do you understand your own language?"⁵² Most importantly, Walker argued African Americans needed to protect themselves and their families against white oppression and that violence could be necessary to oppose racism and slavery.⁵³ After growing up in the South and moving to New England, Walker had come to the conclusion that equality and social reform might require force in order to overcome constant harassment, abuse, and discrimination.

Although Walker's *Appeal* drew particular attention to slavery, he and other activists used such speeches to condemn the growing violence employed by white laborers against free blacks in Boston and other cities. White workers routinely attacked the African American section of the West End in order to enforce the social and spatial boundaries between the black and white communities. Upper class Bostonians encouraged spatial segregation through discriminatory laws and city planning, but white

⁵¹ Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 23; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 172.

⁵² Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom*, 29-31

⁵³ Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 173.

laborers took active steps to police the movement of black workers in their daily lives. Using verbal and physical violence, white workers denied African Americans access to public spaces. After the Slave Trade Act of 1807, Boston's African American community began celebrating judicial emancipation in Massachusetts and the end of the transatlantic slave trade into the United States on July 14. In 1808, for instance, approximately two hundred African Americans assembled on Elliot Street, forming an orderly procession that included a marching band, and proceeded north across Boston Common until they arrived at the African Baptist Church on Pinkney Street. Once they arrived, the group attended religious services, listened to a sermon by Rev. Dr. Morse, and dined together to mark the occasion. According to the *Columbian Centinel*, "the transactions of the day were conducted with great regularity and decency" and the "deportment of the audience during the divine service was devout and solemn."⁵⁴ Using Boston's streets to celebrate a political victory, Boston's African American population lauded the official close of the slave trade and asserted their presence within the greater Boston community.

While white Bostonians allowed the 1808 celebration to proceed without incident, white laborers challenged the holiday when it became an annual affair. In most years, white interference mirrored the abuse described by Prince Hall and came in the form of verbal taunts. In the days preceding one July 14 celebration, however, a rumor spread throughout Boston that the black demonstrators would arm themselves against white harassers.⁵⁵ Angered by the rumored resistance to their oppressive tactics, white laborers met the African American procession with clubs and brickbats near Boston Common. As

⁵⁴ *Columbian Centinel*, July 16, 1808.

⁵⁵ It is unknown in what year white laborers chose to attack Colonel Middleton and the black demonstrators. Neither Lydia Maria Child, the author of the anecdote, nor William Cooper Nell, provided a date for the riot in their writings. Based on where Child lived throughout the antebellum era, the riot occurred before 1824.

the fight transformed into a riot, “terrified children and women ran down Belknap Street, pursued by white boys, who enjoyed their fright.” Contesting the constitutional right of African American Bostonians to publicly assemble, Boston’s white laborers attacked the African American community and denied their access to Boston Common.

In her description of the attack on the African American procession, Lydia Maria Child noted that the African American men initially made “feeble resistance, the odds in number and spirit being against them.”⁵⁶ As the African American procession dispersed, however, a Colonel Middleton exited his home on Belknap Street, raised a loaded musket at the white rioters, and attempted to rally the fleeing black men to fight. In the Revolutionary War, Middleton had commanded an African American company known as the “Bucks of America” and had been honored by Governor John Hancock for his service. According to Child, Middleton had not been a genteel member of the West End, but rather a member of the town’s laboring community who had risen to prominence through his military service:

He was an old horse-breaker, who owned a house that he inhabited at the head of Belknap street. He was greatly respected by his own people, and his house was thronged with company. His morals were questioned,—he was passionate, intemperate and profane.⁵⁷

Based on Child’s description, Middleton had been a long-time member of the laboring community and a respected member of the town’s African American population. Driven out of the town’s laboring community by white workers, Middleton drew inspiration from his role in the Revolutionary War to rally the African American procession and repel their white attackers. Rejecting the white laboring erasure of African Americans

⁵⁶ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 86.

⁵⁷ William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 25.

from the American Revolution and the early republic, the African American veteran formed up a group of African American men and made “a short show of resistance.”⁵⁸

As evidenced by Colonel Middleton’s actions, Boston’s African Americans recognized that they needed to resist attempts to reduce their community to second-class citizens. Like their white laboring counterparts, black Bostonians used the legacy of the American Revolution to assert their rights as citizens in the early republic. Boston’s black population drew upon their role in the imperial crisis and the Revolutionary War to oppose unfair political and economic policies and challenge their social and legal status. Over twenty-five years after the war’s end, Colonel Middleton was a living reminder of African American service in the American Revolution and symbolized the need for the town’s black population to resist racial violence.

While Prince Hall’s 1797 speech suggests that harassment was a daily experience for the town’s African Americans, the July 14 riot marked an escalation in public violence. In subsequent years, Boston’s white laborers attacked the African American community even when incited by other social issues. In 1814, Boston upper class Federalists celebrated the defeat of Napoleon by lighting the windows of the State House across the street from Boston Common. Angry at the public display undertaken by the town’s political elites, a group of white laborers assembled at the State House with the intention of tearing it down. When this proved impractical, the group instead turned their ire towards the West End’s African American population:

We were on the side of Bonaparte, you see—I mean we Boston boys North-enders and South-enders, and we had made up our minds to tear down the State-house as aforesaid. We went to the Common, but didn’t tear down anything thing

⁵⁸ Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*, 26.

at all; but we chased all the niggers off the Common, as we had usually done on occasions of gathering...⁵⁹

In his recounting of the attack, the anonymous laborer stated that the only day African Americans were allowed to celebrate unchallenged was on “nigger ‘lection.” Referring to “Negro Election Day,” an African American holiday of social inversion, the white author asserted that laborers allowed the black revelers “to remain unmolested on Boston Common.”⁶⁰ While white workers would eventually come to attack “Negro Election Day” as well, the initial respect afforded to the African American tradition demonstrates that racism within the laboring community continued to evolve in the antebellum era.

As the nineteenth century progressed, white workers developed a strategy by which they believed they could minimize the African American public presence within the town. Using violence to impose a racial hierarchy, white workers harassed and abused African Americans in an attempt to remove them from the urban landscape. This plan of action was reflected in a racist broadside known as the “Dreadful Riot on Negro Hill!” Although little evidence survives to verify if the riot actually occurred or if it was a fabrication by the printer, the broadside described an incident in which a large group of white truckmen assembled in the West End and threatened to demolish African American homes. The narrative poem follows an African American family as stones pelt them, their home, and their furnishings. After describing the wounds the family received and the destruction of most of their property, the poem concluded by assuring presumably white readers that the African American family had evacuated Boston and fled to the country.

⁵⁹ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 87.

⁶⁰ Shane White, “It Was a Proud Day,” 17; Tager, *Boston Riots*, 87.

By attacking black homes in the West End, laborers convinced African Americans to leave Boston as soon as possible.⁶¹

As the nineteenth century progressed, white laborers would continue to employ the basic message found in the broadside. Through everyday violence, white laborers sought to either drive African Americans from Boston or isolate them within the town. Driven by fears of economic competition and reinforced by ideological concepts of white supremacy, white laborers expelled black Bostonians from the laboring community and enforced social and spatial segregation. By forcing African Americans out of the North End and away from the town's maritime economy, white laborers attempted to remove black Bostonians from direct competition and protect their diminishing economic status. Although Boston's African American population would grow into its own community, it would do so isolated from white workers.

* * *

After Boston's white workers helped to split the laboring community along racial lines, they soon turned their attention to a new wave of European immigrants. In particular, Bostonians witnessed the steady arrival of Irish Catholics that settled in the North and South Ends and entered into the town's laboring and middling ranks. As fears of economic competition revived long-standing anti-Catholic beliefs, Boston's white laborers challenged the new Irish presence and employed the strategy they had developed to marginalize African Americans. Rather than expelling Irish from the laboring community, Boston's white workers would prevent them from joining it at all.

⁶¹ *Dreadful Riot on Negro Hill!* (Boston: c. 1816), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Throughout the early colonial era, Boston had been home to a group of Protestant Irish as well as a small but group of French and Irish Catholics. By 1737, the Irish population had grown settled enough to establish the Irish Charitable Society, an organization that granted financial assistance to suffering individuals and families of Irish descent. Founded by middling Irish Protestants, the Society represented itself as a genteel organization and at meetings required members to keep their seats to “prevent disturbance,” banned alcoholic drinks, and imposed penalties for members who cursed or engaged in other indecencies.⁶²

In its first few decades, the Society counted very few Catholics on its membership rolls. From 1737 to 1764, the Rules and Orders of the Irish Charitable Society stipulated that officers within the organization “be Natives of Ireland, or Natives of any other Part of the British Dominions of Irish Extraction being Protestants, and Inhabitants of Boston.”⁶³ In 1764, however, the society revised their constitution so that both members and officers only needed to be “of Irish extraction.”⁶⁴ This change suggests that the slow trickle of Irish immigrants into Boston increasingly included Catholics. The Irish Charitable Society waited almost thirty years to allow Catholics into officer positions because the town’s Protestants treated even their minimal presence with suspicion. Throughout the 1740s, Boston newspapers consistently covered Charles Stuart, “the Popish Pretender,” during and after the Jacobite uprising. These articles emphasized the danger Catholicism posed to Protestantism and the English crown and asserted that, “The

⁶² Charitable Irish Society By-Laws, 1738, Charitable Irish Society Records, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁶³ Rules and Orders Agreed Upon by the Irish Society in New England for the Management of Their Charity, 1737, Charitable Irish Society Records, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁶⁴ Charitable Irish Society Constitution, 1764, Charitable Irish Society Records, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

Turks are not fiercer Enemies to Christians, than the Popish Irish and the Popish Highlanders are to English Protestants.”⁶⁵ As late as 1772, Boston officials endorsed the freedom of conscience for the town’s inhabitants, but excluded Catholics because they were considered “subversive to society.”⁶⁶ Even after Americans received assistance from their French Catholic allies during the American Revolution, Bostonians of all economic backgrounds believed Catholics posed a threat to their social and cultural institutions.

Early colonial laborers replicated and reinforced the connection between English nationalism and external Catholic threats through Pope’s Day celebrations. On Pope’s Day, Boston’s laboring population participated in an annual celebration that demonized Catholicism and all its adherents. While Boston’s laboring population continued to borrow elements from Pope’s Day for use in nineteenth century demonstrations, the holiday disappeared during the American Revolution. The holiday’s decline began as early as 1775, when General George Washington requested that Massachusetts soldiers ban the celebration during the siege of Boston for fear that it would offend their potential allies in French Canada. Washington described Pope’s Day as a “ridiculous and childish custom” and considered it a “monstrous” insult to Catholicism.⁶⁷ With loyalty to the King and Parliament in serious question by November 1775, Pope’s Day would have appeared to be little more than an overt attack on Catholics and their religious leader. As

⁶⁵ *Boston News-Letter*, January 23, 1746.

⁶⁶ Thomas O’Connor, *The Boston Irish: A Social History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 15.

⁶⁷ George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, vol. 4, October 1775-April 1776 (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1931), 65.

Bostonians cast aside their British identity in the 1770s and 1780s, laborers no longer had an excuse to engage in their “childish custom” and Pope’s Day disappeared from view.

Although Pope’s Day had been left behind, Boston’s laborers retained their suspicion of Catholicism in the early Republic. Bostonians cast “false and scandalous aspersions” against Catholic Chaplain La Poterie in 1789, for instance, after he helped bury a French Catholic in a Boston cemetery.⁶⁸ These lingering suspicions would be exacerbated in the nineteenth century as Boston’s Catholic population suddenly began to rise. As Boston’s white laborers struggled to deal with their rapidly expanding city, they encountered an influx of poor Irish Catholics fleeing legal and economic changes across the Atlantic Ocean. After the War of 1812 and the Napoleonic Wars, Great Britain faced the difficult task of recovering from extremely high taxes and a massive national debt. As the English economy slumped without a wartime demand to sustain it, Parliament passed a series of laws designed to modernize British agriculture and protect it from European competitors through tariffs. While these laws aided existing English merchants and encouraged economies of scale, the new regulations revoked common land rights Irish farmers and crippled the Irish economy.⁶⁹ These policies encouraged already struggling Irish Catholics to flee Ireland and take their chances in the United States. By 1820, Boston’s Catholic population had reached two thousand inhabitants and surpassed the number of African Americans living in the city.⁷⁰

While still less than five percent of the town's population, the sudden rise in poor Irish immigrants brought fears of Catholicism to the forefront. For almost a century,

⁶⁸ Abbe de La Poterie, *To the Public, On the fourth of February ult. 1789, a Frenchman...* (Boston, 1789), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

⁶⁹ O’Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 33-34.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

Boston and Cambridge clergy had repeatedly propagated the message that Catholicism was antithetical to democracy and social order.⁷¹ In 1816, Boston's press joined the city's Protestant religious leaders, as the *Recorder* became the first anti-Catholic newspaper. Not only did the *Recorder* focus on the abstract danger of Catholicism to both American and English Protestantism, but the newspaper considered Irish Catholics living in the United States as well. Reporting on a lecture read before the Religious Historical Society in Pennsylvania, for instance, the *Recorder* emphasized the simplicity of Irish Catholics and the foreignness of their customs. The article argued that Irish and German immigrants still believed in witchcraft, ghosts, and other superstitions, were poorly educated and often illiterate, and known for their physical strength developed through manual labor.⁷²

White laborers imbibed these anti-Catholic sentiments, especially as they received encouragement from middle and upper class Bostonians through what Ray Allen Billington has dubbed "The Protestant Crusade." A direct offshoot of the Second Great Awakening, The Protestant Crusade promoted the idea that "Catholicism was a sworn enemy to democratic institutions and thus a dangerous influence in the United States."⁷³ Catholicism became characterized as a religion "opposed to republicanism, democracy and civil and religious liberties."⁷⁴ It was widely believed that "Catholicism debased its members, hindered their material prosperity, encouraged ignorance and superstition, and

⁷¹ Thomas Foxcroft, *Humilis Confessio: The Saints United Cofession, in Disparagement of their own Righteousness, A Sermon Preach'd at the Tuesday-Evening Lecture in Brattle Street, Boston, January 30, 1749* (Boston: Queen Street, 1750); John Lathrop, *A Discourse on the Errors of Popery: Delivered in the Chapel of the University of Cambridge, September 4, 1793* (Boston: S. Hall, 1793).

⁷² *Boston Recorder*, December 17, 1816.

⁷³ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 39.

⁷⁴ Patrick Carey, *Catholics in America: A History* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 31.

failed to insist on an adequate moral code.”⁷⁵ In short, the anti-Catholic ideology described Catholicism as antithetical to American Society.⁷⁶

This variety of anti-Catholicism sharpened during the 1820s and 1830s despite the relatively small population of Irish immigrants. Although Irish Catholics represented over ten percent of Boston’s population by 1830, this increase would pale in comparison to the flood of Irish families that would arrive after 1841. The strengthening of The Protestant Crusade instead developed out of awareness that institutional Catholicism was becoming a thriving presence on the American landscape. During the early 1810s, American Catholicism gradually became “organized along the lines of the traditional congregational model, with laymen serving as trustees and assuming legal responsibility for church finances and property rights.”⁷⁷ Referred to as a new “Catholic style” by Alexis de Tocqueville, there was a small but growing perception that Catholicism “might well become a powerful contributor to the ‘maintenance of a Democratic Republic in the United States.’”⁷⁸ By the 1820s, this process was abruptly reversed through the appearance of new European bishops appointed by the Vatican to restore ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁷⁹ As Thomas O’Connor concludes, this return to a centralized Roman authority “persuaded many conservative Protestants that they were no longer contending with the nuisance of a small, diffuse, and pathetic cult of misguided immigrants.” Although small in number, the increased Catholic immigration, combined with the restored presence of Catholic hierarchy, convinced both laboring and upper class

⁷⁵ Carey, *Catholics in America*, 31.

⁷⁶ Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 100.

⁷⁷ O’Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 137.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

Bostonians that the ideology of The Protestant Crusade was necessary to combat the perceived threat to republicanism and American liberty.

Beginning in the 1820s, Boston's cultural and religious authorities used newspaper articles, sermons, books, and other pieces of popular culture to foster the ideology of The Protestant Crusade and encourage the entire city to doubt the morals and motivations of Irish Catholics. While both laboring and affluent Protestants treated Irish immigrants and Catholic leaders with suspicion, only workers embraced outright violence. Upper class Bostonians railed against Catholics as a threat to American democracy, but believed that conversion, rather than physical oppression, was the ultimate way to combat the growing Catholic population. In contrast, Boston's laborers engaged with Irish immigrants in day-to-day confrontations in the city's poorer neighborhoods. Similar to their expression of racism towards African Americans, white workers interacted with Catholic immigrants on more than an ideological level. For Boston's workers, racism and anti-Catholicism could be expressed through violence against African Americans and Irish immigrants in public spaces. White Protestant laborers shared these ideologies with their more affluent neighbors, but everyday conflicts within the laboring community ensured they would take a more violent form.

After decades of agreeing with Boston's social and cultural leaders that Catholicism was the enemy of American society, laborers had their fears confirmed upon the arrival of Irish immigrants directly into their neighborhoods and occupations. Drawing upon their own anti-Catholic traditions, Protestant workers in 1821 responded to this development with a failed attempt to revive Pope's Day. Although very little is known about this episode, other than that it was "without success," the effort indicates

that laborers may have wanted to modify Pope's Day into an American anti-Catholic holiday.⁸⁰ Substituting American for British nationalism, the aborted celebration likely would have retained the effigies of the Pope, the Devil, and other Catholic figures. Without the context of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, the new Pope's Day would have simply been a public demonstration of hostility towards Catholics. Suddenly faced with a new ethnic and religious population within their neighborhoods, Boston's white Protestant laborers wished to revive the old holiday to intimidate Irish immigrants.

As Irish Catholic immigrants continued to arrive, fears of economic competition heightened tensions between white Protestant workers and Irish immigrants. While some Irish Catholic immigrants arrived with the skills and financial ability to open shops and work trades, the majority of immigrants fleeing from the southern counties of Ireland were unskilled farmers and laborers.⁸¹ Pursuing the same unskilled jobs that both black and white male laborers struggled to obtain, Irish immigrants found themselves in direct conflict with Boston's increasingly disaffected white laboring community. In addition, Irish immigrants moved into the same neighborhoods dominated by white Protestant workers, filling the tenements near the wharves of the North and South Ends. Irish Catholics eventually came to cluster around inexpensive sections of Boston like Fort Hill in the South End, where many African American workers had lived prior to being forced

⁸⁰ Edward H. Savage, "E.H. Savage's Annals of Boston, 1621-1850," manuscript, 249, Edward Savage Collection, Burns Library, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. No other evidence survives concerning the failed attempt to revive Pope's Day in 1821. It is very possible that Boston officials would no longer sanction rowdy public demonstrations and brawls and quashed the plan before it could move forward. Coincidentally, "A Bostonian" submitted an historical reminiscence to the *Boston Daily Advertiser* on November 8, 1821 that described Pope's Day for those Bostonians who no longer remembered the holiday. In their commentary of the story, the *Advertiser* wrote that Pope's Day had "deservedly been consigned to oblivion since the year 1775." Although Boston's middling and upper class citizens were also prejudiced against Catholics, they seemingly opposed any attempt to bring back the town's notorious laboring holiday.

⁸¹ O'Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 35.

into the West End. As direct competition for jobs and housing, Irish Catholic immigrants became the new target for white laborers seeking to find answers to their economic struggles.

As they had with Boston's African American population, white Protestant laborers blamed Irish Catholics for the continuing degradation of their economic status. Due to the depression in Ireland, recently arrived Irish Catholics accepted lower wages than their white Protestant counterparts. This willingness to take less pay, combined with the sheer number of arrivals between 1810 and 1840, rendered it virtually impossible for white Protestant workers to block Irish immigrants from unskilled laboring positions. Whereas white employers often shared the racial prejudices held by white workers and shunned African Americans seeking work, they hired Irish immigrants to maximize output and reduce costs. Employers readily included Irish immigrants in the antebellum labor pool as they sought the deskilling of work to create an interchangeable class of daily wage laborers. As Irish workers continued to arrive, white Protestant workers blamed the loss of financial resources and well-paying jobs on Catholics. By the 1840s, Bostonians believed that the Irish willingness to work for less was the root cause for the collapsing unskilled labor market.⁸² Without other avenues of commercial or industrial opportunity, Boston's laborers blamed the Irish for the financial woes and took measures to remove them from competition.

Having been unable to revive Pope's Day to intimidate Catholic immigrants, Boston's white Protestant laborers instead engaged in everyday attacks against Irish Catholic workers. Much like the daily harassment experienced by African Americans, this violence appears to have been undertaken to prevent Catholic immigrants from

⁸² Tager, *Boston Riots*, 106.

integrating into the laboring community. White Protestant workers shared the broad racist and anti-Catholic attitudes expressed by middling and upper class Bostonians, but expressed it through violence designed to regulate Boston's public spaces. Protestant laborers vandalized Irish homes in 1823 and 1825 and riots broke out in the Irish section of Broad Street in 1826 after a fight between coopers' apprentices and unskilled Irish laborers.⁸³ In 1828, Protestants of both English and Irish descent continued this pattern and assaulted the homes of Catholics over the course of three nights.⁸⁴ As Jack Tager explains, the violence against Irish immigrants grew increasingly virulent in the 1820s and 1830s because Irish Catholics were unwilling to peacefully tolerate these attacks. Irish Catholics came "from a land where resistance to English rule was endemic and where antagonism between Protestant and Catholic was deep-rooted. The Irishman seemed all too ready to pick up his shillelagh and brutally assault his opponent."⁸⁵ On a consistent, almost everyday basis, white Protestant laborers expressed their anti-Catholic views by fighting with Irish Catholics in an attempt to drive them out of laboring neighborhoods and occupations.

Notably, Boston's white laborers do not appear to have taken specific issue with the Catholics' country of origin. As the inclusion of Irish and English Protestants in attacks on Catholic homes indicate, white Protestant laborers did not necessarily target immigrants based on their country of origin. As very few other ethnic groups migrated to Boston during this period, however, it is unclear how white workers would have treated other immigrant groups. Regardless, white Protestant laborers justified their assaults on Irish Catholics through religious rather than ethnic or racial arguments. Prior to the

⁸³ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 107.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

arrival of the Famine Irish in the mid-1840s, Protestant Bostonians found Irish Catholic immigrants to be “unlettered” and “unrefined,” but did not believe these qualities to be innate to their ethnicity.⁸⁶ Based on the arguments that appeared in Boston’s newspapers and pamphlets, white Protestant Bostonians did not consider Irish Catholics to be a separate race with unique physical and cultural characteristics. Instead, they blamed Irish ignorance, disorderliness, and behavior on the influence of the Roman Catholic Church.

Without Catholic institutions, priests, or nuns, Bostonians believed Irish immigrants would convert to Protestantism and become respectable members of society.⁸⁷ According to the Protestant argument, if Irish Catholics were allowed to extract themselves from the control of Catholic authority, they would no longer be “morally aliens to the feelings, manners, and institutions” of their society.⁸⁸ Some Bostonians took this logic so far that they attempted to trick Catholic children into attending Protestant Sunday School. According an 1831 article in *The Jesuit and Catholic Sentinel*, a “Calvinist Teacher” accosted a young Catholic girl on the way to a Catholic school and convinced her to attend his Protestant Sunday school instead. When confronted by the press, the teacher later admitted to similarly detouring a Catholic boy on the same Sunday.⁸⁹ According to his statement, the teacher acted as he did because he believed the children were “violating the fourth Commandment” by ignoring the Sabbath. Protestant Bostonians directly associated Irish behavior with Catholic influence and believe that the

⁸⁶ Abel Stevens, *An Alarm to American Patriots: A Sermon on the Political Tendencies of Popery, Considered In Respect to the Institutions of the United States, Delivered in the Church Street Church, Boston, November 27, 1834* (Boston: David H. Ela, 1835), 12.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁸ O’Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 40.

⁸⁹ *The Jesuit and Catholic Sentinel*, January 15, 1831.

Irish could become proper citizens if the “*trammels of the Romish Priesthood*,” were removed.⁹⁰

Driven by anti-Catholic prejudices and economic competition, Boston’s white Protestant laborers focused on Irish religion when choosing whom to target with violence and intimidation. While these perceptions of the Irish would continue to evolve in the 1840s and 1850s and come to include racist arguments, Protestant laborers prior to the Irish famine drew their motivation from The Protestant Crusade. Like their attacks on African Americans, white workers imbibed and reproduced the predominant ideologies concerning race and religion, but employed violence in their oppositional tactics. Paralleling the violent crowd actions of the imperial crisis, nineteenth century white workers believed that violence, rather than rhetoric and peaceful resistance, was necessary in order to resist the growing Irish Catholic presence within the city. Although it does not appear to have been a self-conscious decision, Boston’s white Protestant laborers began focusing their attacks on Irish immigrants only after the Irish population surpassed that of African-Americans in the early 1820s.⁹¹ Having already pushed the majority of the town’s African Americans into the West End and segregated them from many occupations, Protestant laborers fixated on Catholicism as the symbol of their economic struggle. After repeatedly failing to rectify the economic inequality imposed by the city’s elites, Boston’s white Protestant workers aligned themselves with the anti-Catholic ideology of upper and middle class Bostonians and blamed their hardship on Catholicism. Identifying the core value that held Irish immigrants together, white

⁹⁰ *The Jesuit and Catholic Sentinel*, January 15, 1831.

⁹¹ O’Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 37; Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America*, 245.

Protestant laborers hoped that eliminating Catholic institutions might drive the Irish from economic competition and from the city itself.

Throughout the 1830s, Protestant workers tested this theory by assaulting symbols of Roman Catholic hierarchy and authority. By 1830, the Catholic population had swelled to seven thousand and, with Irish Catholics accounting for one in ten Bostonians, began to leave an institutional impact on the urban landscape. Catholics in 1827, for instance finished construction on a four-story Ursuline convent on Mount Benedict in nearby Charlestown.⁹² Serving as both a nunnery and a school for upper class Protestant girls, the Ursuline Convent provided a prominent symbol of the Catholic expansion of Boston. While many upper class families, specifically Unitarians, sent their daughters to the school and praised its educational rigor, the laborers who lived near the convent resented its presence.⁹³

At the time, Charlestown was “a town of about ten thousand” and “‘almost wholly occupied by people of English descent’, largely working class.”⁹⁴ Despite its industrial importance in American brick making and shipbuilding, Charlestown’s laborers drew pride from the town’s association with the Battle of Bunker Hill and the beginning of the Revolutionary War. In 1830, the *Boston Recorder* referenced this connection to frame the recently completed convent in the language of The Protestant Crusade. Writing in a style common to nineteenth century travel literature, the *Boston Recorder* declared “Here is ‘Mount Benedict’, which...will counteract every good for which our fathers fought; and while the traveler treads this Mount, he sighs for the day when all false religion shall be

⁹² Nancy Schultz, *Fire & Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 43.

⁹³ Superior Mary Anne Moffatt, *An Answer to Six Months in a Convent, Exposing its Falsehoods and Manifold Absurdities* (Boston: J. H. Eastburn, 1835), 54.

⁹⁴ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 108.

overthrown, and the true religion of Christ pervade the whole world.”⁹⁵ Encouraged by such anti-Catholic rhetoric, laborers in Charlestown and Boston instigated small violent actions against the convent. Within the next few years, Protestant laborers terrorized the Ursulines by shooting the convent’s dog, burning its stables, and attacking another Catholic institution in Boston.⁹⁶ Reprising their strategy previously employed against African Americans, Boston’s Protestant workers attacked Catholic individuals and property to create an inhospitable environment for Irish workers.

In 1834, Protestant workers in both Boston and Charlestown demonstrated the lengths to which they would oppose Catholic immigration through an attack on the Ursuline Convent itself. On July 28, 1834, Sister Mary John Harrison, a former Protestant student who had converted to Catholicism, suffered a nervous breakdown and fled Mount Benedict.⁹⁷ After seeking refuge at the home of a Charlestown brickmaker, Harrison met with Bishop Fenwick, Boston’s leading Catholic figure and mastermind behind the convent, and returned to the convent to convalesce. As she remained out of sight behind the convent’s walls, rumors began to spread throughout both Charlestown and Boston that Harrison had returned against her will and disappeared. After these rumors were given credence by their extensive reprinting in the city’s newspapers, Protestant truckmen from Boston and Charlestown posted inflammatory broadsides that announced their intention to demolish the convent if the matter was not solved to their satisfaction.⁹⁸

Selectmen searched the convent on August 9 and even interviewed Sister Harrison, but withheld publishing an official statement until they could complete a

⁹⁵ “Convent at Charlestown,” *Boston Recorder*, 5 May 1830.

⁹⁶ Schultz, *Fire & Roses*, 108; Schultz, *Fire & Roses*, 136; Tager, *Boston Riots*, 107.

⁹⁷ Daniel A. Cohen, “Miss Reed and the Superiors: The Contradictions of Convent Life in Antebellum America,” *Journal of Social History* 30, no. 1 (Autumn, 1996): 161.

⁹⁸ Schultz, *Fire & Roses*, 161.

second more complete tour two days later.⁹⁹ Likely acting out their own prejudices by looking for signs of Catholic wrongdoing, the officials returned on August 11, spoke to Sister Harrison again, and insisted on investigating “every room and closet, from the cellar to the cupola.”¹⁰⁰ By insisting on the second tour, Charlestown’s selectmen inadvertently encouraged laborers to continue planning their attack and allowed their own anti-Catholic prejudices to perpetuate the rumors. On August 12, a mob of roughly fifty workers from Charlestown and Boston assembled at the Ursuline convent and burned the main building, other structures on the property, and the personal belongings within them.¹⁰¹ During a brief respite, the nuns and pupils escaped the convent and relocated to a Catholic nunnery in Roxbury. In keeping with their method of dealing with their perceived enemies, Protestant workers attacked the most prominent Catholic symbol in the area and forced the inhabitants out of town.

Boston and Charlestown’s laborers attacked the convent for both personal and ideological reasons. Based on the language used in the broadsides leading up to the riot, the workers appear to have been at least partially influenced by the anti-Catholic rhetoric propagated by upper class Bostonians and newspapers like the *Recorder*. Only a week before, Congregationalist Reverend Lyman Beecher had described Catholicism and their institutions as “the inflexible enemy of liberty of conscience and free inquiry” and argued, “nothing is impracticable for the preservation of our liberty and national

⁹⁹ Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, 74.

¹⁰⁰ *Documents Relating to the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown* (Boston: Samuel N. Dickinson, 1842), 12.

¹⁰¹ “Burning of the Charlestown Convent,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, August 12, 1834.

prosperity which ought to be done.”¹⁰² Many Bostonians blamed Beecher for effectively endorsing violence against Catholics and instigating the riot at Mount Benedict.¹⁰³

While the rioters believed that white Protestant Bostonians, openly or not, would celebrate the convent’s destruction as a victory against Catholicism, the mob was also driven by more local goals. In particular, white workers in Charlestown and Boston had come to associate the Ursuline convent with the area’s Irish Catholic laboring population. The nuns living at the convent had previously operated a school for poor Catholic girls and, in the summer of 1834, laborer and mob leader John Buzzell assaulted the convent’s Irish caretaker after an incident in which the caretaker removed three trespassing Protestant women from the grounds.¹⁰⁴

In addition, Mother Superior Mary Anne Moffatt emphasized and encouraged the association between the Ursuline convent and Boston’s Irish workers. On August 9, Moffatt told two Charlestown selectmen that Bishop Fenwick could raise an army of 20,000 Irishmen if anything happened to the convent, and on August 10 she told another that she herself could “raise five hundred Irishmen in fifteen minutes” by sending a message down to the railroad yards. Even while simultaneously planning to demolish the convent, Alvah Kelley expressed concerns that any action would result in “the Irish coming to attack his house.”¹⁰⁵

Taken together, Boston’s Protestant laboring community destroyed the Ursuline convent to oppose both the growing Catholic presence in the United States and the seemingly unstoppable flow of Irish Catholics into their city. By attacking the most

¹⁰² Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati: Truman and Smith, 1835), 159.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Daniel A. Cohen, “Alvah Kelley’s Cow: Household Feuds, Proprietary Rights, and the Charlestown Convent Riot,” *The New England Quarterly*, 74, no. 4, (December, 2001): 538; *Ibid.*, 555.

¹⁰⁵ Daniel A. Cohen, “Alvah Kelley’s Cow,” 560.

prominent symbol of Catholicism in the greater Boston vicinity, white Protestant laborers violently declared their support for anti-Catholic ideology and eliminated a source of pride for Irish Catholic immigrants.

According to contemporary accounts, it appears as though the mob believed most Protestants, and especially the city's Congregationalists, would support their actions. The *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* reported that the Charlestown rioters "had their faces painted—some after an Indian fashion, and others in other ways; and part of the number employed devices and disguises of various other descriptions, adapted to conceal the individuals concerned in the outrage, from recognition at the time of its execution, and of course from punishment hereafter."¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the *Haverhill Gazette* noted that the mob was "disguised by fantastic dresses and painted faces."¹⁰⁷ Although the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* highlighted the practical reason for the disguises, it is more than likely that the Protestant crowd had revived the Anglo-American tradition of rough music for use in the riot. In rough music, or charivari, young, typically unmarried men of the community "mark out those adjudged to be undermining the social cohesion. Once indicted, those targeted would be visited in the middle of the night by raucous, masked intruders, intent upon short-term destruction of the domestic peace to ensure long-term communal security."¹⁰⁸

Not only did the Charlestown rioters disguise themselves in the tradition of charivari, but they also were said to have assembled on the convent grounds prior to the burning "with much noise and tumult."¹⁰⁹ Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English

¹⁰⁶ "Burning of the Charlestown Convent", *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, 12 August 1834.

¹⁰⁷ "Disgraceful Outrage," *Haverhill Gazette*, 16 August 1834

¹⁰⁸ Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 33.

¹⁰⁹ *Documents Relating to the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown*, 14.

rough music typically “included treating the victim to a midnight concert of pots, pans, and improvised drums as well as shouts and screams.”¹¹⁰ Given this strong similarity between the Ursuline convent burning and the ritual of charivari, it is likely that the mob believed their actions agreed with the ideology of The Protestant Crusade. In addition, the “Indian” disguises tied the Protestant laborers to the imperial crisis and the early colonial practice of “playing Indian” to protest foreign influence. The Protestant mob dressed as Native Americans to draw upon the imagined characteristics of New England Indians and oppose a growing threat to “native” culture. By attacking the Ursuline Convent, Boston’s white Protestant laborers joined together their economic frustrations, Revolutionary heritage, and anti-Catholic ideology. Striking at the heart of Irish Catholic pride, the mob expressed their shared Protestant laboring identity and acted to encourage Catholics to flee the city.

In fact, despite acting in accordance with The Protestant Crusade, Boston’s Protestant laborers received almost universal condemnation for their actions from middle and upper class Bostonians. Many upper class Unitarians had sent their children to the Ursuline convent and reacted to its destruction with alarm. Especially as Unitarianism came under fire from the city’s Congregationalists, elites argued that “if for the purpose of destroying a person, or family, or institution it be only necessary to excite a public prejudice, by the dissemination of falsehoods and criminal accusations...who among us is safe?”¹¹¹ Upper class Bostonians embraced and promoted The Protestant Crusade, but denied that the anti-Catholic ideology endorsed riots against religious institutions. Fearing that the Ursuline convent burning set a precedent that would allow laborers to

¹¹⁰ Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*, 20.

¹¹¹ *Documents Relating to the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown*, 16.

assault any individual or organization that was deemed unpopular, wealthy Bostonians rejected the actions of the Mount Benedict mob.

In doing so, Boston's elites demonstrated that although the greater Boston population accepted the tenets of The Protestant Crusade, only laborers believed that the ideology encompassed violent opposition. Members of the Massachusetts General Court, for instance, believed that the prejudices displayed by the mob could be found "in almost every Protestant community," but asserted the riot was "an open violation of the majesty of the law and an ostentatious defiance of civil authority."¹¹² Seeking to prevent further violence against religious institutions, especially their own, Boston's elites stressed that The Protestant Crusade should not include riots and violent resistance. Laboring and upper class Bostonians shared in the anti-Catholic sentiment, but fundamentally differed on how to express it.

By August 1834, middle and upper class Bostonians came to recognize that the city's white laborers had embraced The Protestant Crusade and would use it to justify violent actions. The anti-Catholic fervor had become important enough to laboring identity that Bostonians could easily recognize the divisions it caused within the laboring population. In her threats to the mob, Superior Mary Anne Moffatt described a social environment in which white Protestant and Irish laborers were two discrete communities. Moffatt felt confident that Catholic leaders could call upon Irish laborers when needed to confront the threats of Protestant workers. Although living in the same neighborhoods and working in the same occupations, the two groups remained divided by religion.

¹¹² Majority Report of the Ursuline Convent Committee, Ursuline Convent Burning, Legislative Packets, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.

Through everyday violence and dramatic riots, white Protestant laborers had succeeded in keeping Catholics out of their ranks.

White Protestant workers had excluded Irish Catholics from their community identity, but Irish immigrants continued to establish homes within the city's traditional laboring neighborhoods. While white nativist Protestants had largely succeeded in segregating the African American community in the West End, this group of laborers could not enforce the same geographic isolation upon Irish Catholics. In the subsequent years, this spatial overlap caused hostility between Protestant and Irish Catholic workers to increase. As Boston's affluent social and cultural leaders continued to hone their anti-Catholic rhetoric and ideology, the city's workers took additional violent measures to isolate Irish immigrants. Attacks on Irish Catholics and their institutions grew so common that some churches resorted to posting armed guards to deter Protestant vandals.¹¹³

In an address to the Charitable Irish Society in March 1837, society president James Boyd argued that Boston's laborers were driven by self-importance on the one hand, and "shyness and jealousy on the other."¹¹⁴ Boyd believed that through anti-Catholicism, white Protestant laborers had come to view themselves as socially and culturally superior to Irish immigrants. Marginalizing Irish workers as part of the tenets of The Protestant Crusade, white Protestant laborers had created an environment "which is annoying and vexatious to both, but which is, and always must be, most troublesome to the weaker party."¹¹⁵ Driven to attack Irish laborers by long-term ideological beliefs and

¹¹³ O'Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 48.

¹¹⁴ James Boyd, *Mr. Boyd's Address Delivered Before the Charitable Irish Society in Boston: At the Celebration of their Centennial Anniversary, Marcy 17, 1837* (Boston: James B. Down, 1837), 20.

¹¹⁵ Boyd, *Mr. Boyd's Address Delivered Before the Charitable Irish Society in Boston*, 20.

more immediate concerns for economic competition, white Protestant workers fought against Catholic immigrants in an attempt to create a geographic boundary between the two groups. After failing for more than a decade, Protestant workers grew increasingly frustrated as Irish immigrants continued to pour into the city's laboring neighborhoods. Unlike their attacks on the African American population, white workers found themselves unable to push Irish Catholics out of their community and into another part of the city. With tensions on the rise, the conflict finally erupted in the summer of 1837.

On June 11, 1837, a large group of Irish workers and their families formed a funeral procession on Broad Street near East Street in Boston's South End. While waiting to join the procession, a few Irish workers encountered firemen from Engine No. 20 returning from a nearby store where they had procured "refreshments."¹¹⁶ A brief scuffle ensued in which one of the firemen fell from the sidewalk into the street. Almost immediately, the firemen returned to their engine house on East Street to rally the remainder of their company, followed behind by "a number of Irishmen." Before the two groups could start a brawl, firemen rang the bells on the company's engine and at the New South Church. Usually used to warn Bostonians of a fire, the company used the bells to signal to other fire companies that their assistance might be needed. Interpreting the bells as an actual fire alarm instead of a call for reinforcements, the Irish workers dispersed and rejoined the funeral procession down Broad Street.¹¹⁷

Although the Irish workers on this occasion chose to disperse, conflict between Irish immigrants and Boston fire companies was a relatively common phenomenon. Until

¹¹⁶ Arthur Wellington Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department Including the Fire-Alarm Service and the Protective Department, From 1630 to 1888* (Boston: John P. Dale & Co., 1889), 197; Common Council Report, No. 12, June 22, 1837, Boston City Documents 1784-1970, City of Boston Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, 3.

¹¹⁷ Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 197

their reorganization in 1837, Boston's volunteer fire companies had been traditionally staffed by Protestant men from laboring and middling backgrounds. These companies often drew upon the history and accomplishments of previous generations to derive a fierce sense of pride from their service on an engine. The Melvill Fire Association, for instance, changed their name from the "Rapid Fire Association" in 1832 in honor of Thomas Melvill, a former firefighter and participant in the Boston Tea Party.¹¹⁸ The company, staffed by laboring and middling Protestants from the northern wards of Boston, even considered wearing tri-corner hats in Melvill's honor. Two years after tying their identity to American independence, the Melvill Fire Association helped demolish the Ursuline convent on August 11, 1834.¹¹⁹ The day after, member Nathaniel Budd Jr. boasted about his role in the riot and asserted that that they would soon burn down the city's Catholic churches in order to "disperse the Irish."¹²⁰ As Protestant workers proud of their social and cultural identity, volunteer fire companies often epitomized the laboring hostility towards Irish Catholics.

Had the spat between the first fire company and the group of Irish workers ended with the ringing of the bells, the incident would have been another of many hostile encounters between Protestant and Irish laborers. As the Irish funeral procession passed down Broad Street, however, it encountered Engine Company No. 9, which had also interpreted the ringing bells as a fire alarm. Encountering the second fire company immediately after quarreling with the first, the Irish workers assumed that the firemen had arrived to help their Protestant brethren. This same mistake was then repeated with

¹¹⁸ Daniel A. Cohen, "Passing the Torch: Boston Firemen, 'Tea Party' Patriots, and the Burning of the Charlestown Convent," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 4 (Winter, 2004): 528.

¹¹⁹ Cohen, "Passing the Torch," 546; *Ibid.*, 585.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 572.

the arrival of Engine Companies 9 and 14 and caused the small quarrel to explode into a riot.¹²¹

As the riot unfolded, it came to include over fifteen thousand people and surpassed the Knowles Riot in size and scope. The riot had taken place on a Sunday, which ensured that both Protestant and Irish laborers would be at home rather than occupied at work.¹²² Although the Irish had badly beaten the original volunteer fire companies, several more fire companies and their Protestant laboring allies ultimately took the upper hand. The Protestant laborers and firemen eventually burned large portions of the South End and rendered twenty to thirty buildings, each of which “was probably the residence of nearly as many families,” unlivable for their Irish inhabitants.¹²³ After two to three hours of destruction, the riot ended after Mayor Eliot called up the militia and posted armed patrols throughout the neighborhood. Fearful of further violence between Protestant and Irish workers, Eliot temporarily transformed Boston into a “garrison prepared for battle.”¹²⁴

As the *Boston Courier* lamented, the Broad Street Riot had “no parallel in the history of Boston.”¹²⁵ The sheer scale of the destruction, accomplished in only a few hours, showed a level of ferocity and violence that white workers had not displayed before. A committee of upper class Bostonians, headed by Dr. Henry Bowditch, reported that the Protestant laborers engaged in the riot displayed “a kind of vindictiveness...which we could hardly have supposed to have existed in this community

¹²¹ Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 197.

¹²² Tager, *Boston Riots*, 120.

¹²³ *Boston Mercantile Journal*, June 16, 1837; Tager, 120.

¹²⁴ *Hampshire Gazette*, June 14, 1837.

¹²⁵ *Hampshire Gazette*, June 21, 1837. The *Gazette* reprinted a story from the *Boston Courier*.

had not the proofs of it been before our eyes.”¹²⁶ Based on the sheer number of Protestant laborers who ultimately traveled to Broad Street to demolish the Irish homes, upper and middle class observers searched for motivations beyond the original quarrel. One newspaper described the riots as members of “those classes of the community who sympathize in a common prejudice against foreigners,” while another rightfully argued that the rioters hated the Irish because they believed that they had taken away their jobs.¹²⁷ White Protestant workers blamed their continued economic hardship on Irish Catholics and expressed their rage and frustration through wanton violence.

The Broad Street Riot of 1837 marked the extent to which Boston’s laboring community had fractured along racial and religious lines. Inspired by anti-Catholic prejudice and fearful of economic competition, thousands of white Protestant laborers demolished the homes of hundreds of Irish Catholics. Boston’s African American population had been subject to similar attacks, but the black community had not experienced devastation on this scale. Frustrated by their inability to stop the flow of Irish Catholic immigrants into the city, white Protestant workers staged an uprising involving almost one-fifth of the city’s population.

* * *

Throughout the antebellum era, both African Americans and Irish Catholics experienced increasing levels of violence as white Protestant laborers expressed their racism and anti-Catholicism through harassment and daily conflict. White workers ejected black Bostonians from the North End, subjected African Americans to taunts and physical abuse, and raided the West End for attacks on the fledging black community.

¹²⁶ *Salem Gazette*, June 16, 1837.

¹²⁷ Tager, *Boston Riots*, 120.

White workers maintained this level of violence in order to enforce the social and spatial boundaries they had erected between themselves and African Americans. Emphasizing the ideology of white supremacy and the specter of job competition, white laborers expunged African Americans from their community identity and advocated for a labor market that privileged white Bostonians. In doing so, white workers attempted to reinforce a racial hierarchy that shrank the labor pool and recreated the idealized close-knit laboring community of the early colonial era. Although some African Americans would still make their homes in the South End and extremely poor sections of the city, white Protestant laborers would no longer count them as workers and include them in labor activism.

In the case of Irish Catholics, white Protestant workers originally responded to Irish immigration in the same way they had confronted African Americans. Boston's white Protestant laborers denied Irish immigrants social integration on the basis of anti-Catholic prejudice and out of fear that they would add increased competition to an already difficult economic environment. In response, the white laboring community engaged in a campaign of harassment and everyday violence that they had honed against African Americans since judicial emancipation. Despite these tactics, Irish immigrants continued to arrive in the city and settle in the North and South End. Frustrated by the growing Irish presence, which would transform into a flood in the 1840s due to the Irish Famine, white Protestant workers escalated their attacks as they sought to oust Irish Catholics from their neighborhoods. Protestant laborers failed in these attempts and by the mid-1830s, white Protestants and Irish Catholics could be conceived of as two separate communities living on top of one another. Poor Irish Catholics sought out the

inexpensive housing near the North and South End wharves and made their homes in deeply hostile territory. Like the African American community, Irish Catholics resisted white pressure by establishing their own institutions, including churches, schools, and convents. White Protestant laborers attacked these symbols in an attempt to intimidate and displace Irish Catholics, but ultimately failed to impose the spatial segregation that they desired.

While white workers continued to assault and harass African Americans, the Irish Catholic institutions and homes within their own neighborhoods provided ready opportunities for violent crowd actions. Nativist laborers first burned down the Ursuline convent as a warning to Irish Catholics and later attacked their homes directly in the Broad Street Riot. While white Protestant laborers were unable to evict Irish Catholics from their neighborhoods, they continued to delineate the social and cultural boundaries of their community. Through violence and prejudice, Boston's white Protestant workers forged a laboring identity based in opposition to African Americans and Irish Catholics. In doing so, white Protestant laborers created a community that valued racial and religious commonalities over shared economic experience. Rather than coalescing into a single laboring community, white Protestant workers created three.

Conclusion

From 1737 to 1837, Boston's workers transformed from a loosely bound laboring population to a set of discrete laboring communities. In the eighteenth century, early colonial workers drew into a cohesive community through a shared recognition of their financial hardship, living conditions, and cultural commonalities. Challenging the vision of corporate communalism pushed by the town's political and moral leaders, Boston's heterogeneous laboring community used riots and crowd actions to assert their own vision of Boston society. The laboring community's desire for a moral economy and embrace of radical Evangelicalism as an ideological outlook put them at odds with Boston's officials and wealthy merchants. Over the first half of the eighteenth century, Boston's laborers railed against upper policies that encouraged individualism and unfair economic behavior in an attempt to address their eroding financial security.

As Boston moved into the imperial crisis, Boston's laboring community transitioned from challenging moments of unfair economic behavior to attacking inequality itself. Appropriating the social inversion and misrule of Pope's Day, Boston's laboring community lashed out against signs of wealth, hierarchy and social status in a new wave of riots and public demonstrations. Workers grew more confident in their ability to influence town affairs and displayed a degree of independence that alarmed middling and upper class Bostonians. During the protests of the 1760s, laborers partnered with the Sons of Liberty and other middling Bostonians in order to advance their ideology and undermine the authority of British leaders. Throughout this time, the laboring community took measures to ensure their autonomy even as they sought recognition and approval from Whig leaders.

As white workers sought legitimacy from middling and upper class Bostonians in their attacks on wealthy British officials, they emphasized the class divisions that had emerged within the greater Boston population. Distinguishing themselves from wealthier Bostonians, laborers established themselves as an independent constituency with separate political, cultural, and economic concerns. As class divisions continued to rise, white workers also emphasized the racial fault line within the laboring community. Present throughout the colonial era, this imposed racial boundary established social distance within the laboring community between white workers and free and enslaved African Americans. As white workers agitated against inequality and unfair economic practices during the imperial crisis, they began to separate themselves from African Americans and more closely align themselves with the racial ideologies shared by middling and upper class Bostonians. In the process, white workers limited the possibility of transracial cooperation and ignored the needs of African Americans during the American Revolution.

Free and enslaved African Americans responded to these developments by charting their own future during the imperial crisis and the American Revolution. Taking advantage of the fracturing British social structure, African Americans ran away, petitioned for their freedom, and chose sides during the Revolutionary War in pursuit of social and legal equality. Especially as the Revolutionary War came to a close, African Americans took advantage of the legal environment and forced the end of slavery in Massachusetts through the court system. These developments exacerbated racial tensions between black and white laborers and created friction that would persist and grow more virulent into the early 1800s. The distinct paths taken by these two groups during the

American Revolution would ultimately cause Boston's laboring community to fracture along racial lines.

In the years following the Revolutionary war, Boston rapid population growth transformed the town into a city. As Boston's economy recovered and its core industries returned it to regional prominence, the laboring community experienced a fundamental shift in the contours of labor. In pursuit of greater profits and output, employers imposed the bastard artisan system, degraded the status of labor, and widened the social and economic gap between laboring Bostonians and the middle and upper classes. In response, Boston's white male workers revived the oppositional rhetoric and tactics of the eighteenth century and blamed the city's emerging "aristocracy" for their financial hardship. As they challenged their descent into daily waged labor, Boston's male workers expanded beyond the petitions and crowd actions that characterized the early colonial era and embraced strategies of political activism that emphasized enfranchised citizenship. In the process, male workers stressed their masculinity as a crucial requirement for social, political and economic change and exiled women from labor activism. After almost twenty years of struggle against upper class merchants and their political allies, workers made little progress in improving work conditions or obtaining the ten-hour day. Reflecting on their failure, some workers believed that the antebellum era had been defined by a narrowing of the laboring community and that this had prevented workers from forming inclusive coalitions that could demand economic improvement.

Over the same period, male workers drove African Americans and Irish immigrants from their community in a parallel and mutually reinforcing process. As white workers sought to define themselves in the wake of the American Revolution, they

embraced the racism and anti-Catholicism that had always been prevalent within their community. These ideologies flared up in the nineteenth century as increased job competition and fears of social and cultural change caused white workers to lash out at marginalized groups. Boston's laboring population fractured as white workers expunged African Americans from their ranks and forced them out of the city's traditionally laboring neighborhoods. In the 1820s and 1830s, white Protestant workers attempted to do the same in response to the arrival of Irish Catholic immigrants. Through everyday harassment and violent policing actions, Boston's white Protestant laborers attacked black Bostonians and Irish immigrants and sought to establish spatial and social segregation. African Americans and Irish immigrants resisted these efforts and developed their own communities and institutions that provided the foundations necessary to resist persecution. By the end of the 1830s, these developments allowed Bostonians to conceive of three laboring communities rather than one, with women marginalized as workers all together. In the process of forging a new laboring identity, white workers had defined themselves by fostering social divisions. By the Broad Street Riot and the Panic of 1837, Boston's population found itself divided along the lines of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and class.

The white, male, Protestant laboring identity that coalesced in the 1830s would ultimately be short-lived. In the spring of 1837, the United States economy was struck by a severe economic depression that would become known as the Panic of 1837. Triggered by a severe specie shortage in American banks, the Panic forced 194 American chartered banks to close and caused the rampant deflation of paper currency.¹ Only a few months

¹ Peter L. Rousseau, "Jacksonian Monetary Policy, Specie Flows, and the Panic of 1837," *The Journal of Economic History* 62, no. 2 (Jun., 2002): 457.

after it began, the *Boston Courier* described a city in which the "merchants are ruined, our mechanics out of employment, and their children likely soon to be in want of bread."² Between 1837 and 1843, labor activism virtually ceased as mill and urban workers alike struggled to obtain stable work and provide for themselves and their families. In Lowell, the successful strikes of 1834 and 1836 gave way to a lean period, in which the mills ran on partial schedules, laid off hundreds of workers, and cut compensation. Despite opposing similar moves with protests only a few years earlier, the dire economic straits ensured that mill workers did not strike.³

Similarly, it became clear in Boston after 1843 that the Panic had effectively suppressed the ability of workers to risk their jobs for improved wages or the ten-hour day. According to the *Boston Daily Bee*, the city's white male workers had transitioned away from strikes that risked "the peace of society" and moved towards "temperate, yet firm action."⁴ Boston's workers joined and participated in the New England Workingmen's Association when it met in Boston in October 1844, but they no longer described the city's aristocracy or middle class employers as enemies to their rights as they had in the 1820s and 1830s. Instead, Boston's workers partnered with laboring women, primarily factory workers in other cities and towns, and male and female middle class moral reformers.⁵ The NEWA allowed women to speak, including Sarah Bagley, the leader of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, and Boston's workers welcomed the assistance of these formerly ostracized groups.⁶ These labor organizations, however, did not turn to African Americans and form transracial alliances. White workers

² *Boston Courier*, July 6, 1837.

³ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 108.

⁴ Murphy, *Ten Hours' Labor*, 131.

⁵ Zonderman, *Uneasy Allies*, 42-43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

steadfastly maintained their racist beliefs and continued to ostracize black workers in the 1840s and after the Civil War. This pattern continued even after former abolitionists like Wendell Phillips joined the labor movement and advocated for improved labor conditions.⁷

As more moral reformers participated in labor activism, the rhetoric and ideology of labor began to change as well. Whereas labor organizers of the 1820s and 1830s had been largely put forward secular arguments in their demands for economic change, using Protestantism only as a common marker of laboring identity, the labor movement of the 1840s and 1850s became more closely aligned with the antebellum spirit of utopian evangelicalism. This helped draw in sympathetic middle class reformers, but also reinforced the divide between Protestant and Irish Catholic workers. In the 1850s, the emphasis on Protestantism, as well as nativism, would encourage Boston's white male workers to join the Know-Nothing Party and oppose Irish immigration as a way of holding on to what economic standards they had left.⁸ Irish workers would finally be integrated into the labor movement during and after the Civil War. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Irish workers had also embraced the racism of Anglo-American laborers in order to assert their right to white citizenship.⁹ Through these new alliances, Boston and New England workers were ultimately able to fight for and successfully obtain reduced hours and increased wages. This expansion of the labor movement, however, was only possible because the Panic of 1837 forced a fundamental shift in ideology, cooperation, and tactics.

⁷ Zonderman, *Uneasy Allies*, 95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁹ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 143.

Over the course of one hundred years, Boston's heterogeneous laboring population grew together into a cohesive community only to fracture under the weight of culture and ideology. Through race, class, gender, ethnicity, and religion, white, male, Protestant laborers crafted a laboring identity that emphasized masculinity, citizenship, and public participation. In doing so, this group of workers turned against African Americans and Irish Catholics and marginalized women by ignoring their status as workers. As the nineteenth century progressed, the laborers would gradually form new alliances that reflected the connections within the eighteenth-century laboring community. After failing to force reform with their narrowed laboring coalition, white, male, Protestant workers would reach out to former members of the laboring community for aid in their struggle against economic inequality.

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