The Unknown American Revolution

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ROOTS OF RADICALISM

"CAN AMERICA BE HAPPY UNDER A GOVERNMENT OF HER OWN?" asked Thomas Paine, the thirty-seven-year-old immigrant, just sixteen months after arriving in Philadelphia on November 30, 1774. The answer was succinct. "As happy as she please; she hath a blank sheet to write upon."[1] That notion—of a slate wiped clean of historical encumbrances, of entrenched class hostilities, of religious bigotry, of racial oppression and conflict, of conventions about gender roles, of genocidal urges directed at Native Americans—was heady, exhilarating, and filled with latent dynamite. In a wide range of communities thousands imbibed the idea that the Revolution must take up, as part of its work, the remaking of America. Millennialist preachers, enslaved Africans, frontier mystics, dockside tars, German-speaking privates in Washington's army, mixed- and full-blooded Indians, urban craftsmen, indentured servants, agricultural workers, ascetic Quakers, disgruntled women, born-again men and women calling themselves Christ's poor—all became caught up in the inner dynamics of the Revolution. If we conceive of them as so many grabbers of quill pens, eager to write on the blank sheet, we can see that the American Revolution was not only a war of independence but a many-sided struggle to reinvent America. It was a civil war at home as well as a military struggle for national liberation.

All revolutions are filled with idealistic hopes, millennial yearnings, desires to redress old grievances, dreams of both individual and societal betterment. The moment of rupture from the old regime has historically presented the moment for cleansing, reinvigorating, reforming, and perfecting; so it was with the American Revolution. What experiences and ideas fueled the desire for change, and who would step forward to unfurl banners of reform? Years after the Revolution, John Adams reflected on just such questions. Writing Mercy Otis Warren, his wife's close friend who was writing her own history of the American Revolution, Adams opined that "the principles of the American Revolution may be said to have been as various as the thirteen states that went through it, and in some sense almost as diversified as the individuals who acted in it."[2]

Even before approaching the beginnings of the American Revolution, we must take our cue from Adams's belief in the diversity of the people caught up in it. War has a way of smoothing out prior disputes and healing angry wounds, because facing a powerful enemy obliges people to embrace a common cause. But when war is more than a struggle with arms to seize independence, and when prolonged conflict necessarily involves the creation of new governments to live under, the abrasions of the past are rarely forgotten. Indeed we will see that past injustices, as perceived by important blocs of people, shaped ideas about how the Revolution could usher in, to use the motto of the Continental Congress, *novus ordo seclorum* (a new order of the ages).

In this chapter, we will examine seven episodes of the late colonial period that set the stage for the multifaceted revolution in North America and prefigured the internal struggle for a radically reformed American society. These seven events took place across a sprawling terrain from Maine to Georgia and from tidewater regions along the coast to the deeply forested backcountry. No one involved in any of these episodes had any notion that they were preparing the ground for the American Revolution. Yet the Revolution could not have unfolded, especially in its thrust for reforming American society, without these unknowing rehearsals for revolt and radical reform.

Jailbreaks at Newark

In mid-September 1745, about 150 New Jersey farmers armed with "clubs, axes and crow bars" descended on the jail in Newark, the capital of the royal colony of New Jersey. They demanded that the sheriff release Samuel Bald-

win, who had been arrested for cutting down trees on lands claimed by Governor Lewis Morris, a man of great wealth and the owner of scores of slaves. When the sheriff refused, the crowd mobbed him. They tore the jail door off its hinges and set Baldwin free. Triumphantly making their way out of town, they vowed to mobilize again and bring "fighting Indians" with them on the next occasion that one of their own was imprisoned.[3]

Fourteen weeks later, when the sheriff followed orders from the royal governor to arrest three of the farmers involved in the September jailbreak, the defiant yeomen assembled again. Armed with clubs, they freed one of the prisoners as he was being transferred from one jail to another. Trying to uphold royal authority, the sheriff called out thirty militiamen to surround the Newark jail and prevent further breaks. Undaunted, three hundred determined farmers, marching under a pennant, confronted the militia. "Those who are upon my list, follow me," shouted Amos Roberts, a yeoman leader. With that, the farmers overpowered the militiamen, thrashed the sheriff, freed their friends, and marched out of town.[4]

Other similar events followed. In July 1747, two hundred men marched into Perth Amboy in East New Jersey and vowed that if they were challenged "there should not have been a man left alive, or a house standing." Springing open the town jail, they freed one of their imprisoned leaders.

Mob attacks on the royal jails that summer and fall shattered established authority. "Since that time [in September 1745]," bemoaned the New Jersey Board of Proprietors in early 1748, the yeoman farmers "have gone on like a torrent bearing down all before them and trampling upon all law and authority." Reports circulated that the farmers had established their own jail "back in the woods," where they would imprison their enemies "and then see who durst fetch them out." They operated their own tax system, the worried authorities complained, they elected their own militia officers, and they erected their own courts where justice would be dispensed on their own terms. "Royal institutions and the power of the gentry landowners," writes historian Brendan McConville, "stood on the brink of collapse."[5]

What was amiss in "the best poor man's country," as many European visitors called the mid-Atlantic region? At stake was the question of land and under what conditions it would be owned, leased, or occupied. That had been the story of New Jersey almost from its inception in the 1660s. Indeed, it was the story of all the colonies, for a vast majority of immigrants from the very earliest entries into North America had thirsted for land like the weary

traveler in the desert seeks water. A century before, the utopian dreamer Roger Williams had deplored the "depraved appetite [for] great portions of land, land in this wilderness, as if men were in as great necessity and danger for want of great portions of land as poor, hungry seamen have after a sick and stormy, a long and starving passage."[6] Coming from Europe, where land was scarce and beyond the grasp of most people, immigrants made the acquisition of cheap land and secure title to it their most treasured goal. Land was the holy grail, and control of it became a cause of incessant conflict—both with native peoples and among the Europeans who coveted it.

Title to land, the source of political and social power, had a long, tangled, and unique history in New Jersey, so knotty that no single notion of legality in the ownership of New Jersey land gained consensus in the century before the American Revolution. The trouble began because the lands of New Jersey were granted almost simultaneously in 1664 by two legal entities, creating a dilemma of overlapping authority that could not be overcome for generations. The fast-growing yeomanry in the eighteenth century believed that they tilled land originally controlled by the Dutch West India Company and then granted to New England Puritans who had migrated to northern New Jersey after English forces seized control of the Dutch New Netherlands in 1664. They solidified their claims by purchasing these lands from Native American chiefs. Small farmers also held that the labor they invested in developing these lands gave them rightful possession, especially in cases of disputed claims. Opposing these small farmer property claims were gentry arguments that all of northern New Jersey had been granted by James, Duke of York (the brother of King Charles II), to two English aristocrats, Sir George Carteret and Lord John Berkeley, who were vested with the power to create government, sell property, and collect quitrents (a feudal leftover whereby the purchaser made annual payments to the former proprietor in perpetuity).

By 1701, Carteret and Berkeley had sold their vast land grants in East New Jersey to Scottish investors, who organized themselves into a board of proprietors. Trying to transform East New Jersey into an estate-based society where they would dominate tenants, subtenants, and servants, they instead created a perfect formula for instability, violence, and contested authority. Running afoul of migrants from New England and New York who had settled lands and built farming communities, the Scottish proprietors found it difficult to control the land tenure system they wanted. Confronted with a disputatious

society pitting Scottish patricians dreaming of feudal-style estates against yeomen farmers coveting freeholds, the English imposed royal government in 1701 in an attempt to stabilize New Jersey.

Royal government could erase neither the Scottish proprietors' property claims nor the yeomen's militant antilandlordism. At first, royal government brought a measure of social and political stability to New Jersey. But in the 1740s, a new generation of proprietors, mostly Scottish, reignited battles over property holding by reasserting their legal claims to vast tracts of land in East New Jersey at the expense of the yeomanry. This second generation of Scottish proprietors was something more than a clique of grasping grandees. They prided themselves as subscribers to the Enlightenment, European intellectuals seeking new forms of social organization and political structures to cleanse a corrupt, monarchy-ridden, religiously torn Europe. These Scottish proprietors imagined they could build a peaceful, orderly society in New Jersey where well-educated, landed gentlemen ruled with virtue and honor and schooled the grateful lower orders. Yet their own property interests led them to imagine the impossible—an enlightened republic of huge estates worked by indentured servants and tenant farmers who had no secure possession of the land they tilled.

The result was a revival of the violent disputes over property rights and control of the courts to mediate them that had punctuated the late seventeenth century. Invoking legal rights tracing back to late seventeenth-century land grants to Carteret and Berkeley, the proprietors began evicting yeomen from property that these smallholders regarded as their own. The yeomen saw nothing "enlightened" about this assault on their property rights and the attempts of leading aristocrats, such as Lewis Morris, his son Robert Hunter Morris, the lawyer James Alexander, and members of the powerful Livingston and Delancey families, to impose "the highly exploitative Scottish-style landholding pattern on the countryside." If the landlords thought of themselves as torchbearers of the Enlightenment, the yeomen were equally sure that John Locke, a pillar of enlightened thinking, championed their cause. Borrowing from Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, they wrote in defense of land riots that "When Property is made uncertain and precarious, this band [of government] is broken."[7]

The battle between patrician proprietors and prickly plebeians erupted in the mid-1740s. Protecting land in which they had invested their labor for many years, yeomen farmers threatened to follow the venerable English

lower-class tradition of house pulling—destroying the house of an offender by attaching ropes to the chimneys, roof beams, and joists and, in pulling them down, reducing the whole structure to lumber. Proprietor John Coxe, who claimed vast tracts of land, was threatened in 1747 that if his evictions caused the jailing of any other people "they would go . . . and pull Coxe's house down about his ears."[8]

From the wealthy gentry's point of view, this was treason against the king—an attempt "to throw off his Majesty's authority," in the words of Governor Andrew Hamilton. Arguing that their property claims originated in grants from the king, which they later acquired, the Scottish proprietors charged that the "Multitude of People [were] trading upon the very heels of rebellion, if not actually engaged in it." The yeomen countered that their claims to the property came from their possession and improvement of it through their own labor since purchasing the land from Indian chiefs. The labor theory of value expressed here was an implicit assault on the political and legal authority embodied in monarchical government. Drawing on Lockean ideas, the yeomen's defense of their Newark jailbreaks argued that "It is a received observation that a settled rule of property . . . impartially applied, is the great ligament of government; and when property is made uncertain and precarious, this bond is broken."[9]

Intensifying the disputes were religious and cultural differences between plebeians and patricians. The yeomen were mostly descended from English and Dutch immigrants, though by the 1740s small northern New Jersey communities were thoroughly mixed. Their churches were Congregational, Baptist, Quaker, and Presbyterian. On the other hand, most of the proprietors were Scottish and Anglican, members of the colony's most hierarchical, stiff-necked church. When the Great Awakening of religious enthusiasm broke out in New Jersey in the 1720s, the yeomanry were most affected by the revivalists' message. Apart from spiritual comfort, the Awakening also provided a potent language with which to contest the gentry's position in the property disputes. The gentry-dominated Anglican Church was predictably hostile to the Awakeners and tried to discredit and undermine evangelical preachers as social incendiaries.

As would happen in the American Revolution, religion and politics became thoroughly entwined in the New Jersey land riots of the 1740s. The message of the revivalist preachers, who served small rural communities, was deeply tinctured with antiauthoritarian, antielitist, and antimaterialist mes-

sages that resonated powerfully among those whose land titles were endangered by the gentry proprietors. "Go now, ye rich men, weep and howl, for your miseries will come upon you. . . . Your gold and silver is cankered . . . and shall eat your flesh as if it were fire," preached Theodorus Frelinghuysen, the Dutch Reformed evangelist who touched off the first New Jersey revival in the late 1720s. The itinerant English Awakener George Whitefield, spreading the Awakening with sojourns through New Jersey in 1739 and 1741, further deplored aristocratic fashion and criticized the religious lassitude that came, he cautioned, with the accumulation of material wealth. William Tennent and his son Gilbert, next to Whitefield as the most searing voices of evangelical reform, aroused the plainspoken farmers even more. Crisscrossing New Jersey in the 1740s, Gilbert Tennent, a burly, plainspoken man who, according to one contemporary, was "like a Boatswain of a Ship, calling the Sailors to come to Prayers and be damned," attacked the Anglican clergy as unregenerate and encouraged people to forsake their corrupt ministers. Adapting Whitefield's message to the colonial social landscape, the Tennents infused soul-searching, evangelical preaching with a radical egalitarianism that left many former supporters of Whitefield grasping for their pens. Particularly in the interior hill towns of New Jersey, where land titles were in dispute, the revival reached its peak. The antimaterialist message in the Awakeners' attempt to stimulate a rebirth among the populace produced explicit accusations that the proprietary elite was guilty of "Cut-throat covetousness" in bringing suits of eviction against small farmers living on contested lands.[10]

Though New Jersey was unusually roiled, it was far from the only place where yeoman attacks on property and power holders destabilized society in the late colonial period. In the 1750s, New York's Hudson River valley was torn with tenant revolts against the manor lords who controlled tracts of land so vast as to rival European principalities. In North Carolina, as we will see in chapter 3, thousands of backcountry farmers rebelled against eastern enemies who dominated the colony's government. In South Carolina and northeastern New York, and in the region that would become Vermont in 1777, agrarian insurgents rose up against wealthy men who threatened their livelihoods, which depended almost entirely on land security. In each of these cases, common farmers went "out of the bounds of the law," as Remember Baker put it, bringing charges from the wealthy that the rioters and jail breakers were perpetrating "bold and daring attempts to throw off his

Majesty's authority and their dependence on the Crown of Britain."[11] The agrarian radicals had no intention of overthrowing the English king; they were protecting their land in the face of eviction by local aristocrats. Nonetheless, unbeknownst to them, they were building a legal and political case against monarchical and aristocratic authority; in effect, they were rehearsing for revolution.

Christ's Poor

The fiery comet of the Great Awakening raced through Virginia's foothill Hanover County in the 1740s when Patrick Henry was only a boy. At its core, this firestorm of religious enthusiasm was, in the words of religious historian William G. McLoughlin, "a search for new sources of authority, new principles of action, new foundations of hope" among people who came to believe that "the churches as institutions no longer met the spiritual needs of the people." The Awakeners preached that the old sources of authority were too effete to solve the problems of the day, too encrusted with tradition, self-indulgence, hypocrisy, and intellectualism to bring a sense of hope and faith to a generation that was witnessing the transformation of the world of its forebears. "Our people do not so much need to have their heads stored," pronounced Jonathan Edwards, New England's leading evangelist, "as to have their hearts touched."[12]

When the charismatic George Whitefield from England conducted a tour of the American colonies in 1739–40, he set ablaze Virginia's western frontier counties with the new doctrine of spiritual rebirth. Only twenty-five when he reached the colonies in 1739, Whitefield, the son of an English tavern keeper, was a diminutive youth with a magnificent voice. A master of open-air preaching, he tramped much of the English countryside and then turned his attention to the American colonies. His barnstorming trip evoked a mass response of dimensions never before witnessed in America. It was a response that deeply troubled established leaders—both those in church and those in politics—for Whitefield and the American preachers who followed "the Grand Itinerant," as he came to be known, spread the message that God did not operate through the elite corps of learned clergy and their aristocratic allies. Rather, God worked through the inner light given to every man and woman regardless of their station in life, with lack of education or even slave status posing no barrier to achieving grace through the conversion experience. Whitefield challenged traditional sources of authority, called upon people to become the instruments of their own salvation, and implicitly attacked the prevailing upper-class notion that the uneducated masses had no minds of their own. This was not an entirely new message for nearly a century before, among the millenarian religious sects of England's Civil War period, self-educated preachers such as Mary Cary urged that "the time is coming when not only men but women shall prophesy; not only aged men but young men, not only superiors but inferiors; not only those who have university learning but those who have it not, even servants and handmaids."[13]

In Virginia, such ideas ran afoul of the law and afoul of the colony's established Anglican Church. Patrick Henry's uncle, an Anglican minister in Hanover County, found himself called "a stranger to true religion" and an "unconverted graceless man" who preached "damnable doctrine." Parson Patrick Henry counterattacked. "New preachers ... have lately seduced some unwary people in this parish," he charged in 1745, and he would soon spread a pamphlet attack on the Great Awakening, first printed in New England, with a preface that condemned "a set of incendiaries, enemies not only to the Established Church, but also common disturbers of the peace."[14]

Disturbing the peace? What did an Anglican minister such as Patrick Henry mean by this? And why would he label men "incendiaries" who were bringing streams of people to a state of passionate religiosity and an assurance that they had been reborn? The answer lay in both the message and the medium. The message was one of social leveling, for it put all people on one footing insofar as the conversion experience was concerned. Moreover, the message was one that condemned the established clergy as unconverted and deplored their love of velvet garments and other luxurious trappings. "Christ's poor," as those converted by the Awakeners were called, saw themselves as the true children of God and those most likely to achieve the celestial afterlife.

Lay exhorting summed up all that was wrong with the wave of evangelical enthusiasm in the eyes of conservatives. Patrick Henry, like every other Anglican parson in Virginia, had received his license to teach from the bishop of London, head of the Church of England's overseas Anglican ministers. But now people of no training stepped right from "the plough," or straight from the construction site, as in the case of the self-educated bricklayer Samuel Morris, who refused to attend Anglican services and instead set up religious meetings in a small "reading-house" that he built on his own property. Soon

Morris reading-houses were springing up in Virginia's western counties. This ran hard against the ancient belief within the structured Protestant churches that there was no room for laypersons to compete with the qualified ministry in preaching the word of God. Nor was there room for self-initiated gatherings of people, which were cropping up all over Virginia's western counties, to meet in barns, on riverbanks, or in rude reading-houses instead of licensed churches. This was to relocate authority collectively in the mass of common people. The results were predictable in the conservatives' view. The unlicensed revivalists, Patrick Henry reported to the bishop of London in 1745, "screw up the people to the greatest heights of religious phrenzy and then leave them in that wild state, for perhaps ten or twelve months, till another enthusiast comes among them, to repeat the same thing over again."[15]

Worried Anglican clergymen convinced Virginia's governor to restrain "strolling preachers" who conjured up a world without properly constituted authority. Yet when evangelical Presbyterian ministers from the North, such as the academy-trained Samuel Davies, applied for licenses to preach and establish settled churches, Parson Patrick Henry tried to block them, too. For a time Anglican ministers blocked the licenses through their influence with the House of Burgesses, populated by deacons of the parish churches. But they could not block the word preached by Davies and other evangelists. The slender, handsome young Davies, twenty-four years old when he arrived in Virginia in 1747, found swarms of people lacking "spiritual food" and "nauseated" by comfortless, rigid sermons full of textual references and cold, logical proofs thrown at them by Anglican ministers. Moving carefully, Davies eventually did obtain a license to preach and soon established meetinghouses that were packed on Sunday mornings. "Where I go amongst Mr. Davies' people, religion seems to flourish," recounted a visiting Presbyterian minister. "It is like the suburbs of heaven."[16] As a teenager, Patrick Henry attended Davies's sermons and repeated aloud, at the insistence of his mother, the main parts of the sermon as they drove their carriage home. Henry acquired much of his oratorical skills at the feet of Samuel Davies, whose uncommon artistry in awakening the emotions of his auditors rivaled that of George Whitefield. Henry later claimed that Davies was the most important influence on his life and the greatest speaker he ever heard.

Virginia's ruling class had another reason to fear and oppose religious enthusiasm: It held great appeal for the enslaved. This was partly because the participatory, emotional character of Great Awakening worship provided a

spiritual experience akin to that practiced among many Africans. Extemporaneous praying, congregational singing, and voluntary testifying provided the kind of succor for slaves that dry disquisitions from the pulpit before passive churchgoers could never bring. Slaves also eagerly embraced evangelical Christianity because it gave them the nearly irresistible idea that conversion to Christianity would make them free, as passages of the Bible suggested. This was reason enough for masters in the tidewater area densely populated by slaves to quarantine their bondmen and bondwomen from evangelicalism. But in the piedmont counties, where slaves were held in smaller numbers, Presbyterianism took hold rapidly. Samuel Davies counted hundreds of slaves coming to his meetinghouses and commented on their particular love of singing psalms. "Whenever they could get an hour's leisure from their masters," he wrote, "they would hurry away to my house . . . to gratify their peculiar taste for Psalmody." Many, he claimed, "Have lodged all night in my kitchen; and, sometimes, when I have awakened about two or three a-clock in the morning, a torrent of sacred harmony poured into my chamber and carried my mind away to Heaven."[17]

Although Samuel Davies had brought legitimacy to evangelical Presbyterianism by obtaining a license to preach in Virginia, it proved to be only a temporary sanction. In the same month he received his license in 1747, Governor William Gooch and his council issued a proclamation demanding that "all itinerant preachers" be restrained.[18] After the Hanover County Court issued a license to preach to the fiery New Englander James Davenport, in 1750, the governor ordered the suppression of all circuit riders who had no settled place or established church. For another two decades, religious dissenters ministered to their flocks while living in a gray zone where they were always in danger of having their licenses removed or denied. Not until Virginia passed a Declaration of Rights in 1776 was religious toleration guaranteed.

Revolutions have always begun with an insurgent minority, and the American Revolution was no exception. Whether for white colonists of the middle and lower social orders or for the enslaved, the Great Awakening provided a "radical model" for revolutionary activists, as historian Patricia Bonomi has expressed it. The Awakeners created a mass movement; they challenged upper-class assumptions about social order and the deference due to established figures; they seceded from churches they regarded as corrupt and built new, regenerated ones in their place, even without license; they

forced religious toleration on those arrayed against it and broke apart attempted unions of church and state; they fractured established churches such as those in Virginia and thereby threatened the existing social order. Guardians of the traditional churches preached to their flocks to "obey them that have rule over you." The Awakeners, to the contrary, claimed the freedom "to question and judge all and refuse subjection to every proper judicature." Here was a "pertinent and usable model" for radicals "in the years that lay ahead,"as Bonomi points out.[19]

Even for those untouched by the Awakening but who emerged as Revolutionary leaders, religious revivalism provided blueprints for the way forward in the decades ahead. Patrick Henry's experience is an example. His mother had warmly embraced evangelical Presbyterianism but his father, brother of Parson Patrick Henry, continued to worship at the Anglican parish church. Growing up, Patrick was both ambitious and cautious, and both qualities led him not toward ecstatic religion but toward the more sober and genteel Anglicanism of his father and uncle. Yet he drew from evangelicalism an appreciation of fiery and theatrical presentation and the needs of the humble. As Henry Mayer, Patrick Henry's biographer, puts it, he learned to "amalgamate the evangelical and gentry styles into a powerful political identity" that enabled him to "reach out to ordinary people, speak to them with fire and conviction, meld them into one community of belief, and turn that massed opinion into a new tool of political control."[20]

Little Carpenter's Dilemma

In the 1750s, by the time the invasion of yeoman property rights had died down in New Jersey, cultivators of the soil hundreds of miles to the south were engaged in another violent confrontation that, like the New Jersey example, foretold elements of the American Revolution soon to unfold. The Cherokee people, whose ancient homelands stretched from the interior of Virginia to Georgia, numbered about 12,000 in 1750. For decades they had been indispensable to the security of the English, Scottish, Scots-Irish, and German settlers who thinly populated the up-country region, where they eked out a hardscrabble existence. Tension always arose wherever land-hungry settlers brushed up against Indian settlements. This was the case in all the southern colonies. But for a long time, more bound the settlers together with

the native people than divided them. Especially important were trade and military alliances.

By the 1750s, Indian trade was of signal importance to both sides. It connected native peoples of interior North America with an Atlantic basin network that reached all the way back to European suppliers of worsted materials, glass beads, guns, and other trade goods. Faced with Indian enemies and contending with the Spanish and French for control of southeastern North America, the Virginians, Carolinians, and Georgians also regarded military alliances with powerful Native American tribes as indispensable. In this precarious world, alliance with the Cherokees became the cornerstone of southern Indian policy, and the Cherokees knew this. Their leaders of the 1750s keenly remembered how their people played a decisive role in the bloody Yamassee War of 1715, when British settlers, paying dearly for their abuse of small coastal tribes, faced a militant coalition of the exploited. "The last time they were here [in Charleston]," wrote one white leader in 1717, "they insulted us to the last degree and indeed by their demands (with which we were forced to comply) made us their tributaries."[21]

By the 1730s, abuses by English traders working hard bargains with the Cherokees had weakened Cherokee support. In the 1740s, Cherokee allegiance to the English faded even more because South Carolina's government refused to honor a treaty of mutual support when the upper Creeks, a powerful society to the south of the Cherokees, attacked their old Cherokee enemies. In response, the Cherokees fell upon abusive white Carolina traders, demonstrating that they did not regard themselves as English dependents and had strength enough to control their own destiny. Making overtures to the French, their alternate source of trade goods, the Cherokees kept the English off balance. In 1750, South Carolina's governor reminded the legislature that "it is absolutely necessary for us to be in friendship with the Cherokees, for they are reckoned to be about three thousand gunmen, the greatest nation we know of in America except the Choctaws."[22] With the Choctaws allied with the French in the lower Mississippi area, the Cherokees were the indispensable buffer between the English and their French enemies.

But the day of Cherokee-English alliance was coming to a close. Like other powerful interior tribes, such as the Iroquois and the Creeks, the Cherokees struggled with European smallpox and other diseases that decimated their population. They worried about the corrosive effects of alcohol

and other European trade goods that tore at the fabric of their ancient society. And they wondered whether they could continue to play off one colonizing European power against another while the population of the English colonies kept growing at an alarming rate—from about 250,000 in 1700 to 1.2 million in 1750. "To preserve the balance between us and the French," wrote New York's Indian secretary, "is the great ruling principle of modern Indian policy."[23] But the Seven Years' War, breaking out in North America in 1754 and ending in 1763, bringing to a climax nearly a century of Anglo-French hostilities over control of North America, greatly altered the equilibrium between Indian and European peoples. Now the Cherokee stood on the edge of a dangerous and potentially catastrophic new era.

The Seven Years' War, voluminously chronicled in American history, can be treated only skimpily here. For present purposes, it is enough to understand its enormous importance to the Cherokee as well as other Indian nations. Indian involvement in the war, the greatest armed conflict in a century and a half of English colonization in North America, foretold the experience of Native Americans in the Revolution that lay just over the horizon.

In the northern sector of the Seven Years' War territory, the decision in 1759 of the powerful Iroquois nations to abandon their long-held position of neutrality in Anglo-French conflicts proved decisive. Joining the Anglo-Americans, the Iroquois helped bring the French to their knees. They were promptly showered with gifts of trade goods for their efforts. But in the South, power politics worked differently for the Cherokees. At the outset of the war, Virginia's governor, Robert Dinwiddie, worked hard in 1754 to gain Cherokee support for the attempt of the Virginia militia, led by the young George Washington, to dislodge the French from the forks of the Monongahela and Ohio Rivers, a strategic location for controlling the Ohio River valley. Cherokee chiefs at first promised the Virginians a thousand warriors, but they reneged when they could not secure more favorable trading terms with the Carolinians. Washington had no Cherokee warriors with him in the summer of 1754, when he suffered greatly in skirmishes with the French. In July 1755, when English general Edward Braddock suffered a disastrous defeat in the depths of the American wilderness near the forks of the Ohio River, he had only eight Native Americans with his army.

Renewed appeals to the Cherokees brought half promises of support against the French. In 1757, about 250 Cherokee warriors fought with the Virginia militia on the western frontier. But they fought as mercenaries, not

as allies. When they were not paid according to agreement, they plundered Virginia frontier settlements in order to collect by force what the white government failed to give them. This occurred again in 1758, when some four hundred to six hundred Cherokee warriors led by Attakullakulla (known to the English as Little Carpenter because he was a skilled orator, politician, and diplomat who could fit together his people's ideas and plans of action like a skilled carpenter joins wood) enlisted in General John Forbes's formidable British regiments. But when Forbes offended Attakullakulla, he tried to withdraw from the impending fray. Attakullakulla was furious about being called a deserter. On top of this insult, Virginia frontiersmen began ambushing Cherokees who were returning from battle alongside the English and living off the land as they made their way home. At least thirty Cherokees lost their lives at the hands of their so-called allies, who proved unwilling to distinguish between friendly and hostile Indians. A few such incidents were all that was required to fan into a roaring blaze the anti-English embers that had been kept alive in the westernmost Cherokee towns (called the Overhill Cherokee towns), where pro-French sentiment still remained. Cherokee messengers went out to the Creeks and Chickasaws in the winter of 1758–59. With spring thaws came backcountry skirmishing from Virginia to South Carolina, and a full-scale war with the Cherokee people was soon under way.

As happened repeatedly in the American Revolution, Indian leaders struggled for a way to preserve their land, their supply of weapons and ammunition, and their political autonomy. For the Cherokees, in the midst of a seriously deteriorating situation with their old English allies, all the signs were ominous. While their warriors had moved north to fight with the English against the French, backcountry South Carolina settlers in the Long Canes settlement were invading the hunting grounds of the Cherokees and diminishing their food supply. This added to the feeling among the young warriors that the white backwoodsmen were no longer their friends. South Carolina's governor William Henry Lyttleton contributed to the decaying situation by spurning Attakullakulla's attempts to mend the rift. By cutting off the supply of gunpowder to the Cherokee, the arrogant and inflexible Lyttleton virtually guaranteed war.

At an impasse, the Cherokee laid siege in January 1760 to Fort Prince George, which the English had built in the Cherokee hill country to counter French influence from the west. Here South Carolina held twenty-two Cherokee warriors hostage. The Cherokees were unable to capture the fort,

but within weeks they had attacked frontier settlements from southern Virginia to South Carolina, sending white settlers reeling back to within seventy-five miles of the tidewater capitals of Williamsburg, New Bern, and Charleston. Governor William Bull of South Carolina, succeeding Governor Lyttleton, recognized that the Cherokees were more than a match for the bedraggled force of militiamen at his disposal and agreed to a treaty that made concessions to the Cherokees on "terms that perhaps may not be thought suitable, according to the rules of honour observed among Europeans," as he delicately put it.[24] But then the arrival of 1,300 crack Highland Scottish troops under Colonel Archibald Montgomery promised a quick victory over the Cherokee. The British forces devastated the lower towns on the eastern side of the Great Smoky Mountains but were bogged down in the rugged terrain in their attempts to overpower the middle towns, deep in the mountains of what is today Tennessee. Ambushed at every turn and short on supplies, the British retreated to Charleston. In August, Fort Loudoun, the main English garrison in Overhill Cherokee territory, surrendered to a Cherokee siege.

British soldiers and Carolinian militiamen renewed the war in the summer of 1761. This time they succeeded in overthrowing the Cherokee. Always striving for peace, Attakullakulla tried to arrange a truce, but younger chiefs and warriors, preaching a nativist revival, blocked his way. Likewise, white settlers and British officers wanted revenge for the previous summer's defeats. With 700 militiamen from Virginia and South Carolina joining 1,800 British regulars and handfuls of Catawba and Chickasaw warriors, a scorched-earth campaign destroyed the Cherokee middle towns along with their crops. Cut off from their supply of French trade goods, the Cherokees submitted to a peace treaty that acknowledged English sovereignty and established the eastern boundary of the Cherokee territory on terms that yielded some of the lower towns' hunting grounds to the English.

Losing their supply of trade goods and unable to organize a pan-Indian offensive, the Cherokees joined the French as losers in the Seven Years' War. They lost half their villages, a large portion of their hunting grounds, and thousands of their people. The Cherokees would find some comfort when the British, in 1762, appointed John Stuart superintendent of Indian affairs in the southern colonies. Stuart had befriended Attakullakulla, and through his respect for the accommodationist chief pledged to deal less treacherously with

The young Thomas Jefferson, a student at the College of William and Mary, remembered for his entire life Outacite's farewell address in Williamsburg just prior to the chief's departure for London in 1762.

the Cherokee. But Attakullakulla knew, as would be the case in the Revolution soon about to begin, that he had been eclipsed by younger, nativist chiefs who were determined to resist Anglo-American corrupt trading practices, intimidation, and territorial invasion. Stuart and Attakullakulla shared the belief that conciliation rather than conflict was in the interest of both whites and Indians. But it was the burden of the coolheaded Stuart to curb venal traders and land-crazed frontiersmen if ever the friendship of the Cherokee could be preserved. Nearly every facet of the Indians' dilemma in the American Revolution—how to maintain trading relations while preserving their land and political independence—had now played itself out in the brief but punishing Cherokee War of 1759–61. In fact, the Indians' American Revolution had already begun.

"The Mobbish Turn" in Boston

The main cause "of the Mobbish turn in this Town, is its Constitution; by which the management of it is devolv'd upon the populace assembled in their town meetings . . . [where] the meanest inhabitants . . . by their constant attendance there generally are the majority and outvote the gentlemen, merchants, substantial traders and all the better part of the inhabitants; to whom it is irksome to attend." Thus wrote Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts, standing in New England's chief seaport and reflecting on his neighbors who populated the nerve center of colonial Puritanism. Many years later Thomas Jefferson would call the Massachusetts town meetings deplored by Governor Shirley "the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government." But for William Shirley, writing in 1747, there was entirely too much self-government. Too many "working artificers, seafaring men, and low sorts of people," he complained, accounted for the "mobbish spirit."[25]

Sitting at his desk penning this letter to the Lords of Trade in London, Governor Shirley was no doubt in a bad mood when it came to Boston's town meeting because, just two weeks before, Bostonians had staged the greatest tumult in the city in many years. When Commodore Charles Knowles brought his Royal Navy fleet to Boston for reprovisioning, in preparation for cruising the West Indies, he sent press gangs ashore before dawn to replenish his depleted crews. Impressment had brought angry protests from Bostonians in recent years, just as it had in the mid-seventeenth century English Civil War, when radical Levellers and Fifth Monarchy Men resisted the seizure of their bodies and called pressing men into armed naval service in an attempt to deprive them of freedom and reduce them to a "slavish condition."[26] Facing impressment this time, Boston commoners defied not only an English commodore but their own governor. Shirley called the militia to arms to stop the raging crowd that was stoning the colony's statehouse windows and burning a royal barge it had hauled to the courtyard of the governor's house. But how could the militiamen heed the governor's call when most of them were in fact part of the defiant stone-throwing crowd? Infuriated, Commodore Knowles threatened to bombard Boston from his warships in the harbor. Great bloodshed was averted only after the release of impressed townsmen.

One day before Governor Shirley condemned Boston's town meeting as a crucible of mob politics, a pamphlet signed by "Amicus Patriae" appeared in

the streets. In hard-hitting, plain language, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the Province of Massachusetts-Bay in New England* defended the "natural right" of Bostonians to band together for defense against arbitrary presses by officers of the king's Royal Navy. The author, probably the brawny young Samuel Adams, who made his living as a brewer, started with a diatribe against the crude power of royal government, centered in London, but broadened his argument to indict some of Boston's wealthy elite. Pointing to wealthy Bostonians who had defended the royal impressment action and Governor Shirley's condemnation of the people's spirited fight against it, Amicus Patriae charged that "Some of figure and interest among us live at ease upon the produce" of laboring people who were the targets of press gangs. These "Tools to arbitrary Power [and] . . . slaves to their present petty advantages," he recommended, should be "obliged to serve, as a common seaman, for seven years on board the worst ship of war, and under the worst commander the King has in his service."[27]

If Boston's "mobbish" town meetings gave Governor Shirley a headache, he must have experienced a migraine on January 4, 1748, when Sam Adams and a group of townsmen launched the *Independent Advertiser.* The newspaper's pitch to the laboring classes was obvious from the first issue. "Liberty can never subsist without equality," it pronounced, "so when men's riches become immeasurably or surprisingly great, a people who regard their own security ought to make strict enquiry, how they came by them." Every Boston reader knew instantly that this attack on growing inequality and the rise of a new mercantile elite referred to the wrenching economic derangement in the early 1740s. At that time the liquidation of paper money issued to soften a severe recession led to a drastic deflationary policy that had ruined many Bostonians, including Sam Adams's father. "But some will say," continued the *Independent Advertiser*, "is it a crime to be rich? Yes, certainly, at the public expense." Taken verbatim from *Cato's Letters*, the attacks by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon on the Horace Walpole government in England and the rise of the new capitalist economy there, this was the most explicit formulation ever heard in Boston that the rise of a wealthy elite was connected with the miseries of many in the middle and lower ranks. Several issues later, still defending the impressment uprising, the *Independent Advertiser* linked Boston insurgency to internal economic problems. The people had warrant in taking the law into their own hands because they had watched "their estates crumbling to nothing, their trade stagnate, and fail in every channel,

their husbandry and manufactures rendered for want of hands almost impracticable, and insupportable weight of taxes," while "others thriv[ed] at their expense and [rose] to wealth and greatness upon their ruin." Echoing the Levellers of the English Civil War a century before, the newspaper insisted that "All men are by nature on a level; born with an equal share of freedom, and endowed with capacities nearly alike."[28] In its first month of publication, the *Independent Advertiser* had sowed the seeds for radical attacks on amassed wealth that would flourish less than two decades later when the American revolutionary movement began.

Massachusetts rallied from the economic difficulties of the 1740s, but the Seven Years' War, beginning in 1754, took a terrible toll on the male population that had flocked to fight against the French in Canada. When the conduct of the war shifted to the Caribbean, after Anglo-American victories over the French in Montreal, a postwar depression inflicted greater pain. This brought political controversy to Boston in 1760 when Thomas Hutchinson, lieutenant governor of the colony, and his conservative merchant and lawyer followers decided that the time was ripe to renew attempts to dismantle the town meeting system of government that Governor Shirley had excoriated thirteen years before. Known in the popular press as the Junto, Hutchinson's group was composed of wealthy men surrounding the royal governor, who at this time was Francis Bernard. Most of the Junto members belonged to the Anglican Church, and many were related by blood or marriage. They had long bristled at the indignity of attending town meetings where leather-aproned craftsmen outnumbered them. As the gulf between top and bottom grew, they became more convinced that the herd of common people was congenitally turbulent, incapable of understanding economic issues, moved too much by passion and too little by reason, and unfit to exercise political power.

In the 1750s, poverty had stripped a large part of Boston's lower class from the roll of voters, and the town meeting had become a distinctly unplebeian instrument, sending wealthy merchants to the general court and electing many conservative selectmen to run city affairs. But for Hutchinson's Junto this was not enough, especially when the arrival of a new governor, Francis Bernard, drew them into his inner council and gave them new hopes of consolidating their power. First and foremost, such a consolidation depended on abolishing the town meeting, in operation for more than a century. Their plan was to replace it with a "close corporation," modeled on English city government where aldermen and councilmen elected their own replace-

ments and the lord mayor had great power. A "Combination of Twelve Strangers" calling themselves "the New and Grand Corcas [Caucus]," warned the *Boston Gazette* on May 5, 1760, was determined to "overthrow the ancient Constitution of our Town-Meeting, as being popular and mobbish, and to form a Committee to transact the whole affairs of the town for the future."[29]

Almost as if to prepare Bostonians for events that lay over the horizon, the Junto, cried the *Gazette*, would attempt to keep "tradesmen, and those whom in contempt they usually term the low lived people," from voting at the upcoming election of Boston's four representatives to the colonial legislature. If they could not successfully challenge the eligibility of ordinary Bostonians at the polls, the Junto would attempt to buy their votes by threatening them with loss of jobs or indictment for unpaid debts. In answer, a committee of artisans, working with the "old and true caucus" of Boston's populist party, urged Boston's laboring people to stand up to these threats. Craftsmen should "put on their Sabbath cloathes . . . , wash their hands and faces that they may appear neat and cleanly," go to the polls, and rebuff the "strangers" of the new caucus—"strangers" being the term that the fiercely Puritan popular party leaders still used to deprecate those who worshiped at the Anglican Church.[30]

The election of May 13, 1760, brought out a record number of Boston voters choosing representatives to the colony's legislature. The result was indecisive, with each side electing two members. But the hotly contested election led the city down a path that would soon be littered with issues directly connected to the first stages of radical revolutionary activism.

Shortly after the election, Governor Francis Bernard appointed Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson as chief justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court of Judicature. Hutchinson, whose house had been mobbed twelve years earlier after he promoted fiscal measures hurtful to the city's ordinary families, was now seen as the personification of grasping, self-serving, narrowly concentrated power. In English liberal thought, this was exactly the kind of man who threatened the rights of a free people. Bostonians soon saw for themselves. In February 1761, Hutchinson convened the Superior Court to consider what would come to be known as the "writs of assistance" case, the beginning of a long series of English policy changes that led to the American Revolution. English customs officials in Boston, under strict orders from London to crack down on smuggling by Boston's merchants, asked the Superior Court to issue general search warrants under which customs officials

could enter the warehouses of suspected smugglers. Opposing these writs of assistance were sixty-three Boston merchants.

Peering down from the bench, the bewigged Hutchinson faced his bitter enemy, lawyer James Otis, son of a country politician who had gained popularity among Boston's common folk. The legal issue at stake was whether English law authorized such writs and, if so, whether the Massachusetts Superior Court could issue them. If the answer was yes, then customs officials could obtain these warrants to enter any premise in Boston, regardless of whether there was probable cause for suspecting that imported goods were smuggled to evade the duties that stocked the king's coffers.

In a packed courtroom Hutchinson listened with shock to Otis's oration. A country-bred thirty-five-year-old from Martha's Vineyard had the gall to argue that Parliament was invading the fundamental rights of British subjects by passing trade laws requiring duties on imported goods. Such laws had never been contested since the Navigation Acts were first passed a century before. Brushing aside the technicalities of the law and striding onto higher ground, Otis challenged the principles of British constitutionalism that undergirded the writs. The writs were not really the issue, he exhorted in a passionate, arm-waving speech. What was really under consideration was parliamentary law that shackled the American economy. Writing years later, Samuel Adams recounted that "the child independence was then and there born, [for] every man of an immense crowded audience appeared to me to go away as I did, ready to take up arms against writs of assistance."[31]

Moving cautiously, Hutchinson adjourned the court and wrote to London for advice. After receiving orders to proceed, he reconvened the court, rejected Otis's arguments, decreed that writs of assistance were legal, and issued them to customs collectors. However, the issue had already gone beyond legal procedure, spilling over to infect local politics. Otis and other popular party writers filled the *Boston Gazette* with assaults on the Hutchinson group, which replied in kind in the conservative *Boston Evening Post.* The *Gazette* made sure every reader understood that Hutchinson's circle had become entrenched and dangerous: His brother-in-law Andrew Oliver was the provincial secretary; Oliver's brother was on Hutchinson's Superior Court; one of Hutchinson's brothers and another relative were judges on the Suffolk County Inferior Court; his nephew was register of the probate court and Secretary Oliver's deputy. The web extended into every corner of government.

"Is not this amazing ascendancy of one family foundation sufficient on which to erect a tyranny?" wrote the rising young lawyer John Adams.[32]

Otis's campaign against Hutchinson and his circle has usually been interpreted as the product of family rivalry and the mounting tension over trade regulations. Otis, the sulfurous orator—either mad or brilliant, according to one's views—is generally pictured as the man who called the lower orders into action. But Otis did not simply orchestrate the actions of laboring Bostonians; he also reflected their opinions. Laboring-class people were not so much dough to be kneaded by master rhetoricians and political manipulators, and Otis did not need to create a feeling of alienation among their struggling ranks; that feeling was already there. In truth, Otis was serving two masters: Boston merchants who had evaded the trade laws established by Parliament and were battling the writs of assistance; and laboring people who had suffered in Boston for more than a generation. Otis had more to offer the merchants—a spirited resistance to the writs of assistance—than to laboring Bostonians. For the latter he offered no blueprint for economic reform but only verbal attacks on those who disdained humble Bostonians and totted up their profits while the poor suffered. Accordingly, Otis threw himself into attacking Hutchinson's party surrounding the royal governor. If Otis was insane, as his opponents began to charge, it mattered little, for as one worried conservative put it, "Massaniello was mad, nobody doubts it; yet for all of that, he overturned the government of Naples"—a reference to the peasant fishmonger who in 1647 had mobilized the masses in southern Italy against a hated food tax and led his followers to empty the jails, attack the rich, execute hundreds of public enemies, and briefly stand the political order on its head.[33]

Between 1761 and 1764, spokesmen for the popular and prerogative factions engaged in a furious battle of billingsgate that planted seeds soon to be watered. Newspaper essays became extreme with charges of "Racoon," "stinking Skunk," "Pimp," "wild beast," "drunkard," and dozens of other choice titles. But more important than the invective itself was the deep-seated, class-driven animosity that the polemical pieces exposed: suspicion of laboring people and hatred of their leaders on the part of the Hutchinsonians; contempt and anger toward the wealthy, Anglican elite by the common people. The Hutchinsonians particularly deplored Boston's popular caucus, which they tried to expose in the *Evening Post* as a pack of political manipulators leading ordinary people by their noses. Meeting secretly, they claimed,

caucus members decided on the town officers who would stand for election and decide on what issues to raise at town meetings. Then, "for form sake," the Hutchinsonians charged, caucus leaders "prepared a number of warm disputes . . . to entertain the lower sort; who are in an ecstasy to find the old Roman Patriots still surviving." Democracy as practiced by the caucus was nothing but a sham.[34]

There was truth in some of this. John Adams described how he met in the sail loft of Tom Dawes, where caucus members "smoke tobacco till you cannot see from one end of the garret to the other . . . drink [flip] I suppose and . . . choose a Moderator who puts questions to the vote regularly; and Selectmen, Assessors, Collectors, Wardens, Fire Wards, and Representatives are regularly chose before they are chosen in the Town." However, ordinary people saw no betrayal of participatory town politics in this mode of operation because they were most interested in what the town officers delivered. Moreover, ordinary Bostonians believed they had a real voice in local government. "The Rage of Patriotism . . . spread so violently . . . thro' town and country," wrote the *Evening Post* in March 1763, "that there is scarce a cobbler or porter but has turn'd mountebank in politicks and erected his stage near the printing-press from whence his oracular decisions have been stamp'd off and delivered to the world as infallible nostrums." If this horrified the conservatives, caucus writers charged, it was because the rich were obsessed with money and "couldn't have the idea of riches without that of poverty. They must see others poor in order to form a notion of their own happiness." In what was once a flourishing town, "a few persons in power" wanted to control politics and promote projects "for keeping the people poor in order to make them humble."[35]

In 1763, the Hutchinson-led circle made another attempt to abolish Boston's town meeting. They failed again. But each attempt inflamed the public in this town of 16,000, where face-to-face encounters were the norm. The *Evening Post*, Hutchinson's mouthpiece, deplored the "personal invective" that the "modern Politician" of the caucus wallowed in by engaging "hireling Scribblers" to turn out "downright scurrility and gross impudence" by the yard. The Hutchinsonians soon printed a mock report of a London criminal, "Hector Wildfire," who was obviously James Otis. The report told Bostonians that Wildfire had been hanged at Tyburn in London and then removed for autopsy. "Upon ripping open [Wildfire's] belly, which was much distended, it was found to be fill'd with wind which rush'd out violently. . . .

There seemed to be a profuse quantity of liquor in the Gall Bladder, and so extremely corrosive that it ate the instruments of operation like aqua fortis [nitric acid]." The doctors found a heart "very small and very hard" as if gnawed away by wasps. The head had a double row of teeth, a forked tongue, a skull of "uncommon thickness," and a brain cavity so small that its contents would not fill a teacup. After dissection, the doctors threw the pieces of the body to "a kennel of hounds," who had since "run mad."[36]

Like so much tinder awaiting a spark, the output of Boston's newspapers had set the scene for a donnybrook. On the eve of the Stamp Act passed by Parliament and signed by George III in March 1765, Boston was no longer one community. The region's principal seaport was socially fragmented, unsure of itself, and suffering prolonged economic malaise. The prerogative party, led by the governor and Chief Justice Hutchinson, tried to convince a broad electorate that the very men who had accumulated fortunes in an era when most had fared badly were alone qualified to govern in the interest of the whole community. Middle- and lower-class Bostonians had heard these ideas for half a century, but they understood that aristocratic politicians who claimed to work for the commonwealth could not be trusted. Such men employed the catchwords of the traditional system of politics—"public good," "community," "harmony," and "public virtue"—to cloak their own ambitions. The popular party leaders also employed these terms, but accepted a participatory form of politics, which they thought was the only form of government that would guarantee economic justice and keep Boston faithful to its traditions.

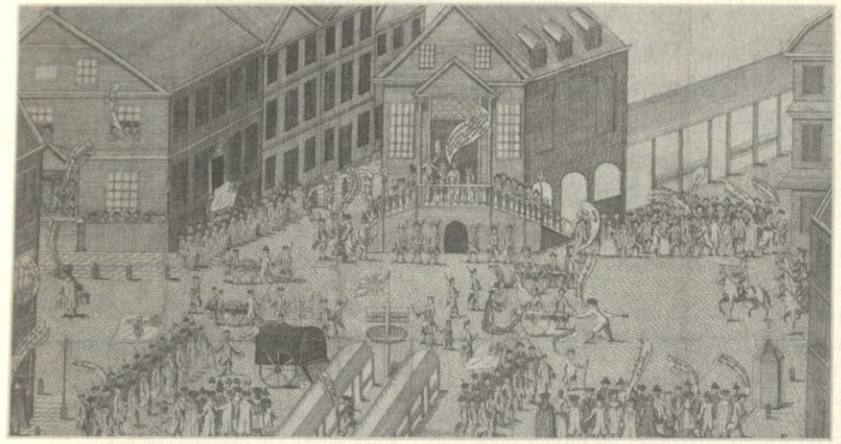
"Cum Multis Aegis" *in Philadelphia*

On October 14, 1764, one year after wealthy Bostonians made their last attempt to dismantle the town meeting in 1763, Benjamin Franklin had one of the worst days of his life. Franklin had made his way from his native Boston to Philadelphia, the center of Quaker pacifism and humanitarian reform, forty-one years before at age seventeen, and he had risen to become the city's most celebrated and public-spirited citizen, known around the world for his experiments with electricity. But on Election Day in 1764, he felt anything but celebrated. Indeed, his heart sank as he witnessed an election unlike any held in the eight decades since William Penn founded his "peaceable kingdom." Philadelphians had produced their share of inflammatory political

rhetoric as Quakers, Presbyterians, and Anglicans contended for power in the colony where Penn's descendants still held great proprietary clout, especially in appointing provincial officials, controlling vast tracts of land, and filling the seats on the provincial council (the upper house of the legislature). Philadelphia had even been rattled by a brief but bloody election riot in 1742. But October 14, 1764, shook Philadelphia to its roots—and led to involving ordinary people in politics in ways that would deeply affect the chemistry of revolution making.

Trouble had been brewing for months. At the end of the long Seven Years' War, the uprising of Ottawa warriors, led by Chief Pontiac, against British traders and colonial frontiersmen had set Pennsylvania's western frontier ablaze. Convinced that their legislature meeting in Philadelphia would do little to defend them, the frontier farmers descended on the city on February 4, 1764, with clubs and pitchforks. Along the way, they mutilated and slaughtered twenty Christianized and entirely peaceable Conestoga Indians who lived about a hundred miles west of Philadelphia. Found among the ashes near the burned-out Indian cabins was the treaty that the Indians struck with William Penn in 1701. The treaty promised that the two sides—the English and the Indians—"shall forever hereafter be as one head and one heart, and live in true friendship and amity as one people."[37] Calling themselves the "Paxton Boys," the frontiersmen backed off after being met by a hastily organized volunteer association of citizen soldiers rallied by Benjamin Franklin to save the city from fellow colonists.

British troops squelched Pontiac's Rebellion, Franklin's personal army stood off the Paxton Boys, and the Pennsylvania legislature met some of the backcountry settlers' demands by passing a bill to raise one thousand militiamen to guard the frontier. But the air had been dreadfully poisoned, and Quakers and Presbyterians were soon at each other's throats. Quakers (and others) knew that most of the Paxton Boys were Scots-Irish Presbyterians, and this led Quakers to believe that their frontier lawlessness—Franklin called them "white savages" in a hard-hitting pamphlet—prefigured a Presbyterian takeover of the colony. The unjustifiable murder of Christianized Indians now billowed up into verbal civil war. Quaker pamphleteers pictured the Paxton Boys' march on Philadelphia as part of a global conspiracy, "the latest installment in a perpetual Presbyterian holy war against the mild and beneficent government of the Kings of England" that stretched back to the



This earliest depiction of a bustling colonial city shows voters ascending the stairs at the Philadelphia courthouse to cast their ballots in the election of 1764. The Quaker meetinghouse is on the left.

bloody Presbyterian uprisings in Scotland in the mid-seventeenth century. Presbyterian writers responded with charges that the Quakers were "soft" on Indians and had held on to legislative power during the Seven Years' War when pacifist principles kept the hands of frontiersmen tied behind their backs. Philadelphia's presses struck off so many venomous pamphlets that Franklin wrote friends that he had never seen more "violent parties and cruel animosities" before and feared that "civil bloodshed" would soon occur.[38]

In the greatest mistake of his career, Franklin now joined Quakers and enemies of the Penn proprietorship of Pennsylvania in waging a campaign to put the colony under royal government, where its governor would be appointed by England's king instead of by the grandsons of William Penn. The campaign for royal government politicized Philadelphia to an extraordinary degree, and the timing was disastrous for Franklin and the Quakers, since colonial anger had already been aroused by England's attempts after the Seven Years' War to tighten its grip on the administration of the North American colonies. Known as a herald of people's lives, liberty, and property, Franklin put himself in an untenable position by backing the instituting of royal government when up and down the coast people believed England was in fact laying siege to traditional rights of English subjects.

In the fierce battle over instituting royal government, leaders of both political factions reached downward to mobilize the city's ordinary citizens—craftsmen, laborers, and mariners—in short, the people that most colonial leaders had feared as a mindless and dangerous element in political life. This was by no means the first time that a divided elite had appealed to those below them in order to win elections—in either Pennsylvania or other colonies. In the 1720s, a perfectly aristocratic Pennsylvania governor, the Scottish baronet William Keith, in danger of losing hold on his office, appealed to laboring men and assured them that "We all know it is neither the great, the rich, nor the learned, that compose the body of the people; and that civil government ought carefully to protect the poor laborious and industrious part of mankind." His equally well-placed opponent, the lawyer David Lloyd, tried to match this populist appeal by flatly stating that "a mean man, of small interest, devoted to the faithful discharge of his trust and duty to the government" was well enough equipped for high office and vastly preferable to wealthy, self-interested men. Before this election was over, conservatives such as the merchant prince Isaac Norris trembled that "the people head and foot run mad. . . . All seems topside turvy. Our public speeches tell the country and the world that neither knowledge nor riches are advantageous in a country. . . ." A few years later, with spirits still running high amid a deep recession, Governor Keith was playing to the most ordinary voter by "perambulating our city and popping into the dramshops, tiff, and alehouses where he would find a great number of modern statesmen and some patriots settling affairs, cursing some, praising others, contriving laws and swearing they will have them enacted *cum multis aegis* [by the multitude]."[39]

Franklin and his friends did not have to employ new political tactics and strategies, nor did they have to fashion new ideological arguments aimed at a more democratic conception of a just society. Franklin had seen all this just after arriving in Philadelphia in 1723. The scene described above was, in fact, his first encounter with popular politics. Still a teenager, he had witnessed the electoral door open to ordinary citizens like himself, who could regard themselves as capable of reaching an informed opinion and entitled even to serve as a legislator. Now, in the 1764 campaign to end eighty-two years of proprietary government, the Franklin party had only to draw on earlier precedents. But they carried Franklin and his followers further—with mass meetings and door-to-door harvesting of signatures on petitions in favor of royal government. "Taverns were engag'd [and] many of the poorer and more depen-

dent kind of labouring people in town were invited thither by night," wrote one alarmed defender of proprietary government. Some were induced to sign petitions by "the eloquence of a punch bowl," others by "the fear of being turn'd out of business." Going "into all the houses in town without distinction," grumbled the nephew of Thomas Penn, the proprietor, they emerged with the names of "a few ship carpenters and some of the lowest sort of people."[40]

But fire demanded fire in return. The Proprietary Party, needing signatures for counterpetitions, knew where to find them—among "the lowest sort of people." In fact, they outstripped Franklin's stalwarts. Setting aside earlier castigations of the Franklinites for prevailing among "those very generally of a low rank, many of whom could neither read nor write," Proprietary leaders made "unwearied endeavours to prejudice the minds of the lower class of people."[41] Every white male found himself being courted by the leaders of the two political factions. Never in Pennsylvania's history did the few need the many so much.

As the battle thickened, pamphleteers reached new pinnacles of abuse and scurrility. In the process they left in shreds the patrician notion, held by most upper-class colonial leaders, that the middling and lower ranks owed deference to those above them who were better educated, more experienced, and wealthier. Franklin found himself reviled by Hugh Williamson, professor of mathematics at the College of Philadelphia (which Franklin had founded) as an intellectual fraud, a corrupt politician, and a lecher who begged and bought honorary degrees in England, stole scientific knowledge, impregnated a "kitchen wench" who produced his illegitimate son William Franklin, and practiced "every zig zag Machination" in politics. Franklin's hatchet man responded by labeling Williamson "A reptile," who, "like a toad, by the pestilential fumes of his virulent slabber" attempted "to blast the fame of a PATRIOT." William Smith, president of the College of Philadelphia (later the University of Pennsylvania), was presented to the public as a "consummate sycophant," an "indefatigable" liar, and an impudent knave with a heart "bloated with *infernal malice*" and a head full of *"flatulent preachments."* Another Franklinite pamphleteer renamed the Presbyterians "Piss-brute-tarians (a bigoted, cruel and revengeful sect)." Another hired gun reached the summit of scatalogical polemics by suggesting that now was the time for William Smith to consummate his alliance with the proprietary pamphleteer David Dove, who "will not only furnish you with that most

agreeable of all foods to your taste, but after it has found a passage through your body . . . will greedily devour it, and as soon as it is well digested, he will void it up for a repast to the Proprietary Faction; they will as eagerly swallow it as the other had done before, and, when it has gone through their several concoctions, they will discharge it in your presence, that you may once more regale on it thus refined." One shocked outsider wrote a friend in Philadelphia: "In the name of goodness stop your pamphleteer's mouths and shut up your presses. Such a torrent of low scurrility sure never came from any country as lately from Pennsylvan[i]a."[42]

But the torrent did not stop. "There has not been a week since you left," wrote one Philadelphian to a friend in May 1764, still five months before the election, "but there has been one or more pamphlets published and sold about the streets." Before the campaign ended, more than thirty-five broadsides and pamphlets, not to mention dozens of newspaper fusillades, filled the streets. Hardly anyone in the river town of 15,000 escaped knowledge that the colony's chief justice, who had risen from sugar boiler to wealthy merchant, was called "Old Drip-pan," an adulterer who had slept with his African slaves for twenty years, and was a "tricking Judge and Presbyterian Jew." David Dove, schoolteacher and pamphleteer, stood accused of sodomy, misogamy, miscegenation, concupiscence, and the almost unheard-of flaw of teratology. The president of the College of Philadelphia was held up to public scorn as a man who spread venereal disease among his female slaves.

Religious leaders were also drawn into electioneering, violating the old maxim that ministers should not meddle in politics. According to one rural clergyman, Presbyterian and Anglican ministers in Philadelphia distributed petitions in favor of retaining the proprietorship of the Penn family, "turned their pulpits into Ecclesiastical drums for politics, and told their people to vote according as they directed them at the peril of their damnation." A "Gentleman from Trans[y]lvania," pretending to be an impartial observer, charged that Philadelphia's Anglican leaders had "prostituted their temples . . . as an amphitheatre for the rabble to combat in." The first committees of correspondence in the revolutionary era were organized not in Boston by radical opponents of English policy but by Pennsylvania Presbyterians who, by May 1764, had created a colonywide network in order to fight Franklin's campaign for royal government.

The flood of polemical pamphlets rife with inflamed rhetoric, the involvement of the churches in politics, and the mobilization of social layers previously unsolicited and unwelcome by political leaders all combined to produce an election where everybody's integrity was questioned, every public figure's use of power was attacked, and both sides presented themselves as true representatives of "the people." The effects were dramatic: After polls opened at 9 A.M. on October 1, 1764, and remained open through the night, party workers on both sides shepherded in a record number of voters. Included were the infirm and aged, some carried to the courthouse in litters and chairs. By the next morning, party leaders were still rounding up stray votes. The polls finally closed at 3 P.M. Franklin and his friend Joseph Galloway lost their seats in the provincial assembly, defeated by defecting German voters and propertyless laborers. Franklin no longer sounded like a popular leader. The leather-apron man, proud of his roughened hands, complained bitterly that his political opponents had herded to the courthouse "the wretched rabble brought to swear themselves intituled to vote." "They carried (would you think it!) above 1000 Dutch from me," cried Franklin. A bit of postelection doggerel caught the spirit of the contest:

A Pleasant sight tis to Behold
The beggars hal'd from Hedges
The Deaf, the Blind, the Young, the Old
T'Secure their priveledges

They're bundled up Steps, each sort Goes
A Very Pretty Farce Sir
Some without Stockings, some no Shoes
Nor Breeches to their A__e Sir.[43]

Franklin, the master politician, who had so often in the past swung the public behind his programs for reform, had badly miscalculated sentiment among his own leather-apron men. A great many could not be dissuaded from the view, as it was later put, that "the little finger of the King was heavier than the loins of the Proprietor." Deeply wounded, Franklin had to suffer what John Dickinson, an assemblyman opposed to royal government in Pennsylvania, pronounced: that "no man in Pennsylvania is at this time so much the object of the public dislike."[44] But, while it marked the low point of his

distinguished career, this astounding rebuff only briefly derailed Philadelphia's most popular and celebrated person. However, permanently derailed were prior beliefs about deferential politics, decorous politicking, the marriage of religion and politics, and the illegitimate role of character assassination in electoral politics.

Although the Philadelphia election of October 1764 was an extreme case and was affected by factors unique to the politics of proprietary Pennsylvania, it reflected a trend in political life in other parts of the colonies. Political innovations involving new organizational techniques, a vocabulary of vituperation, the use of violence, attacks on vested authority and high social position, and the mobilizing of men at the bottom of society that earlier had been deplored were transforming political culture in widely diverse locales. Whenever the elite was divided, as was increasingly the case in the late colonial period, well-born politicians reluctantly worked to activate and obtain the support of the lower classes because this was their only political reservoir to tap. Though they were called "the rabble" and told they had no right to participate in politics if they were illiterate or propertyless, common people were acquiring a sense of their importance despite the manipulations of those above them. The full significance of these developments would become apparent only when local conflicts began to intersect with issues of how and whether England could tighten its rule of the American colonies. This convergence occurred with dramatic swiftness in the shocking events that took place in the summer and fall of 1765.

"Fondness for Freedom"

Historical accounts of the popular politics that roiled Boston and Philadelphia in the early 1760s give almost no sense that many of the witnesses to these events were dark-skinned people born in Africa or descended from Africans who had been brought in chains to the American colonies since the early seventeenth century. In fact, all the colonial cities had hundreds of slaves, as many as 2,600 in New York and 1,500 in Philadelphia by 1760. Many were owned by such emerging revolutionary leaders as Boston's John Hancock, New York's Robert Livingston, and Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin and John Dickinson. Philadelphia's mayor in 1760, William Masters, owned thirty-one slaves. In northern rural areas, they were held in

smaller numbers, though in the tobacco-growing areas of the Connecticut River valley, in the Narragansett region of Rhode Island, and in old Dutch farming areas in Queens and Kings counties in New York they made up hefty fractions of the agricultural laborers. In the South, virtually every political leader was a slaveholder, and the greatest of the emerging revolutionary leaders—for example, Virginia's George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and George Mason; South Carolina's Henry Laurens and William Henry Drayton; and Maryland's Charles Carroll and his son—were holders of slaves numbering in the hundreds. But their higher mortality rates and lower fertility rates meant that they would make up about one of every five inhabitants of the thirteen colonies on the eve of revolution. They were also unevenly spread throughout the colonies. Nearly nine of every ten North American slaves toiled in the tobacco, indigo, and rice fields of the southern colonies, representing about half of the total population. In New England, they were only 15,000 or so in number, not more than one of every twenty inhabitants.

We know little of the private thoughts of some 350,000 slaves who lived in the colonies in 1760. But we do know a great deal about how they behaved, and from that knowledge we can make reasonable inferences about what they thought as they stood silent witnesses to urban political turbulence, agrarian land riots, Indian frontier warfare, and religious revival. Only a few of them were capable of writing and even the few that were literate had circumscribed lives that left them little time to pen letters, essays for newspapers, or autobiographical narratives. But a handful did give accounts of their lives, rendered orally in the African tradition and captured in print by white writers, usually in the last stages of the storyteller's life or after he or she died. The story of one African American life in particular helps us gain a broad understanding of how black experiences in the late colonial period set the stage for what was to be a massive participation in the American Revolution, an important role in its outcome, and a turning point in the history of the African diaspora. This was the story of Broteer, later known as Venture Smith.[45]

Eight-year-old Broteer was the son of a king. His world collapsed in 1736 when Bambara slave raiders captured his village and killed his father. They marched Broteer and other members of his village to Anamaboe, in what is Upper Volta today, on the Gold Coast of West Africa. This is where Broteer

first saw a human with light skin. When a slave ship from Rhode Island arrived to pick up human cargo, Broteer's Bambara captors sold him to the ship's steward for "four gallons of rum and a piece of calico [cloth]." The steward named him Venture on account of his "having purchased me with his own private venture," that is, to sell the young boy for a profit as soon as the ship reached the Americas.

After stopping in Barbados, the ship reached its destination in Connecticut. Here a Connecticut farmer purchased Venture, gave him the surname Smith, and set the boy to work at farm and household tasks. A year later, Smith remembered, "I began to have hard tasks imposed on me . . . or be rigorously punished."[46] The African boy was now part of a growing number of slaves—some 7,000 in New England, about 15,000 in the mid-Atlantic colonies, and at least 120,000 in the southern colonies from Maryland to Georgia. Enslaved Africans had only begun to replace white indentured servants from England, Ireland, and Germany in the late seventeenth century; but now, in the second third of the eighteenth century, societies with some slaves were becoming slave-based societies, especially in the South.

Growing tall and strong in his teens, Smith was a restive slave. Particularly galling was his master's son, who "came up to me . . . big with authority" and "would order me to do *this* business and *that* business different from what my master had directed me." Tempers flared. When his master's son flew into a rage and attacked him with a pitchfork, Smith defended himself and pummeled the white boy until he was in tears. Overpowered by four white men soon on the scene, Smith was hanged on a cattle hook for an hour while another servant gathered peach tree branches to tear the skin from his back. Venture was spared after his master's son, dabbing his eyes with his handkerchief, fled the scene and "went home to tell his mother."

By age twenty-two, Venture Smith was a giant by eighteenth-century standards. Over six feet tall and weighing 250 pounds, he acquired a reputation as a prodigious worker with amazing strength. By day he labored as a farmhand and carpenter. By night he worked for himself, catching fish and game to earn money to purchase his way out of slavery. Shortly after marrying Meg, another enslaved African, Smith made his break for freedom in the early 1750s. He stole a boat and provisions from his master's home and, with three white indentured servants, also chafing under servitude, rowed across Long Island Sound from Connecticut to New York, hoping—with scant

geographical knowledge—to reach the Mississippi. Smith had taken to his heels like many other resistant slaves; but like most of them the chances of representing himself as a free black, at a time when only a few had that status, were slim.

Freedom lasted only an instant. One of the white servants ran off with the party's scant provisions, leaving the others to fend for themselves. Heartsick and discouraged, Smith returned voluntarily to his master. As was the case so often with runaway slaves, he was put up for sale. Luckily, Smith's new Connecticut master, Thomas Stanton, soon purchased his wife and their baby girl. But then an argument broke out between Meg and Mrs. Stanton. Smith recalled finding them in a violent quarrel of the kind that frequently occurred when slaves tried to negotiate the terms of their enslavement. "Hearing a racket in the house," Venture recalled, he rushed in and "found my mistress in a violent passion with my wife." Meg stood her ground and ignored Venture's plea to apologize "for the sake of peace." Then "my mistress turned the blows which she was repeating on my wife to me," taking down her horsewhip and "glutting her fury with it." Defending himself, Venture "reached out my great black hand . . . received the blows of the whip on it," and then seized the whip and threw it into the fireplace. When his owner returned, "he seemed to take no notice of it, and mentioned not a word of it to me." But a few days later, when Smith was putting a log in the fireplace, he "received a most violent stroke on the crown of my head with a club two feet long and as large around as a chair post." Staggering to his feet, Venture threw his master to the ground and dragged him out of the house.

Venture and his wife had lived in New England long enough—it was now the early 1750s—to know that the law was rigged against them for they were regarded as chattel property, to be used, abused, and sold like horses as the master and mistress saw fit. But they also understood that slavery in New England had not stripped enslaved Africans of all rights, including the right to read, marry, and assemble on rest days or holidays, as was not the case in colonies such as Virginia and South Carolina. So, thinking himself unjustly attacked, Venture fled to a local justice of the peace to plead his case. The justice "advised me to return to my master, and live contented with him till he abused me again, and then complain." Smith agreed to this, and the justice warned Stanton against abusing his slave. But on the way home, Stanton and his brother "dismounted from their horses . . . and fell to beating me with

great violence." The muscular Smith overpowered both of them. "I became enraged, turned them both under me, laid one of them across the other, and stamped both with my feet," he later wrote. After the town constable arrived to restrain him, the local blacksmith fitted Smith with ankle and wrist shackles. Unsubdued, Venture showed off his chains and thanked his mistress for "the gold rings." When his master warned he would sell Venture to the West Indies—the common way of threatening mainland slaves with a living hell—Venture replied: "I crossed the waters to come here, and I am willing to cross them to return."

Venture's owner now knew he could never break Smith, who had a will as powerful as his body. "I continued to wear the chain peaceably for two or three days," Smith remembered. "Not anyone said much to me, until one Hempstead Miner of Stonington asked me if I would live with him . . . and that in return he would give me a good chance to gain my freedom. I answered that I would." But Smith's third master soon sold him for a quick profit to a fourth, Colonel Smith of Hartford, for whom Venture toiled for five years, working on his own time to save money coin by coin. But many coins would be needed because Meg gave birth to two sons during that time.

Finally, at age thirty-six, in the year of the mobbish Philadelphia election of 1764, Venture purchased his way out of twenty-eight years of slavery. Now the race began to set his family free. Venture worked feverishly, while white colonists became entangled with what they regarded as the tyrannical edicts of the British government—the attempts, as they often said of the English, to enslave *them*. "In four years," Venture recounted, "I cut several thousand cords of wood . . . I raised watermelons and performed many other singular labors." Described by historians Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan as a black Paul Bunyan "who swung his axe to break his chains," Smith "shunned all kind of luxuries" and "bought nothing that I absolutely did not want." Like Benjamin Franklin, his watchwords were industry and frugality; but for Smith the scramble to break slavery's chains made the work all the more urgent. By 1768, he had purchased his sons out of slavery, soon to be followed by his daughter. Another five years passed before he could purchase Meg, just in time to ensure that their fourth child would be born free (at birth a child followed the condition of the mother, not the father). As the American Revolution approached, Smith acquired a farm on Long Island, purchased a house, and began building a small cash reserve. Here was a truly self-made man—called by the Connecticut editor who published Smith's narrative in

1798 "a Franklin and a Washington in a state of nature, or rather in a state of slavery."

Venture Smith was one of about 250,000 slaves brought to the British colonies of North America between 1700 and 1775, a figure that dwarfed the 28,000 seventeenth-century arrivals. In the 1700s, colonial slavery reached its peak, with slaves outnumbering white European immigrants. Only a small fraction duplicated Smith's success in working their way out of bondage, but few among them did not yearn for freedom. Some waited for the day when their bondage would end; others forced the action. They had a long history of such yearning, almost from their first arrival in the Americas. Cotton Mather, Boston's Puritan intellectual giant, had felt compelled to lecture the city's slaves in 1721, warning them against the "fondness for freedom in many of you" and urging them to rest content with what he called their "very easy servitude."[47] In every colony, this "fondness for freedom" manifested itself in the half century before the Revolution. In the meantime, like Venture Smith, slaves had to endure a code of laws, social rules, and attitudes designed to keep bondpeople and all their descendants (since slavery, by law, was inherited) from freedom. Yet many made the terms of their bondage a matter for negotiation in a multitude of abrasive and often violent encounters with masters and mistresses.

It was with these yearnings for liberty and with a background of resistance against their captors that slaves entered the revolutionary era. What enslaved Africans and a few thousand free African Americans also carried into the argument brewing between the American colonists and their imperial masters was knowledge of the outright rebellions against slavery that had punctuated recent decades. In 1712, in New York City, dozens of slaves rose up to overthrow their oppressors. Without the garrison of English soldiers, one observer reported, the "city would have been reduced to ashes, and the greatest part of the inhabitants murdered."[48] In 1739, South Carolina slaves outside of Charleston seized guns, burned and plundered plantations, and headed south to take refuge with the Spanish in northern Florida, who had established a community of free blacks at Fort Mose. Known as the Stono Rebellion, it was the largest in the colonial era. A year later white authorities nipped in the bud a slave plot to capture Annapolis, Maryland.

To the north, perhaps hearing of the slave revolt in South Carolina, a wave of slave arsonists burned barns in New Jersey in 1740. Other slaves closer to Venture Smith struck in New York City, where nearly one-sixth of the

population of 12,000 were enslaved. This insurrection terrified the city and led to prolonged trials of those suspected of treachery. After torture produced sixty-seven confessions, white authorities hanged or burned at the stake thirty slaves and four white co-conspirators and transported seventy-two others out of the colony.

In what turned out to be a prelude to the response of enslaved Africans during the American Revolution, the disruptions arising out of the Seven Years' War gave southern slaves new opportunities to test their chains. With the French enemy on their western frontier offering rebelling slaves "liberty and lands to settle upon," southern colonial militia units were of little help to the British. "The thing is impossible," wrote one white leader; "they have scarce whites enough to prevent the defection of their slaves; and if any considerable [militia] party should happen to be defeated when abroad, it could be scarce possible to prevent their total revolt." In 1756, mindful of unrest in the tidewater region, where most slaves toiled, Virginia's slave-owning legislators allocated over half the military appropriations for that year for militia patrols to control restive slaves.[49]

In 1759, another assault on slavery boiled up in Charleston, South Carolina. Here, more slaves saw North America for the first time, on the harbor's Sullivan's Island, than anywhere else in the colonies. More than half the city's 12,000 inhabitants were black, almost all of them enslaved, and in the colony at large three-fifths of the inhabitants were slaves. White authorities got wind of an uprising led by a free mixed-race man named Philip John, who vowed "that he had seen a vision, in which it was reveal'd to him, that in the month of September [1759] the white people shou'd be underground, that the sword shou'd go through the land, and that it shou'd shine with their blood." Just as he was planning an attack on the Cherokee, South Carolina's governor Lyttleton noted that "a spirit of cabal began to show itself" among slaves outside Charleston and that "their scheme was to have seized some arms and ammunition that were in a storehouse . . . and then with what force they could collect to have marched to this town."[50] Philip John was seized, tried quickly, and executed.

How much enslaved Africans such as Venture Smith and his family knew of these revolts cannot be known with certainty since few slaves were literate enough to leave behind any paper trail to tell us of the state of their minds. But news traveled fast in the colonies, as we will see, and it is reasonable to as-

sume that knowledge of slave rebellions, reported in white newspapers, could not be kept from the part of the population that had the greatest stake in them. The historian of the Stono Rebellion, Peter Wood, argues, "it may well be that, during the generations preceding 1776, African Americans thought longer and harder than any other sector of the colonial population about the concept of liberty, both as an abstract ideal and as a tangible reality."[51]

Heralds of Abolition

In the generation preceding the advent of the American Revolution, the lines of communication that spread news of black insurgents also carried reports about a small number of white colonists who found slavery to be a sin and a curse. Going back to ancient times, only a few holy men entertained the notion of a world without masters and slaves. But if the biblical idea that "[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth" [Acts 17:26] was too exalted for most people to live by, it was also one too worthy to be put out of mind. In the colonies, a few men of great religious intensity—and a complete disregard for social pressures—devoted themselves to making sure that people would not forget. In so doing, they became the first messengers of a radical reform movement that would gain momentum during the American Revolution.

Such a man was Benjamin Lay. Born to poor Quakers in England, Lay spent seven years at sea and then a few more in Barbados, where he and his wife witnessed the barbaric conditions of African slavery. Coming to Philadelphia, the hunchbacked, dwarfish Lay was shocked to see fellow Quakers practicing slavery. So began what some called crazed zealotry, but what others admired as an uncompromising display of conscience. Lay was a strict vegetarian, refusing to eat anything provided through the death of an animal. He sometimes lived in a cave on his small farm outside Philadelphia. He and his wife made homespun clothes to avoid materials made by enslaved Africans. He publicly smashed his wife's teacups to discourage the use of slave-produced sugar. Taking his cause to the quiet Quaker meetings, Lay made himself impossible to ignore. On one occasion, he stood outside a meeting with one bare foot buried in deep snow to dramatize how badly slaves were clothed in winter. He also kidnapped a Quaker child to bring home to Friends the grief suffered by African families when their children were

A modern historian has called Benjamin Lay "a Day of Judgment in breeches." At the time, very few saw Lay as anything more than an eccentric at best, a disturber of the peace, and a misguided peddler of visionary ideas at worst.*

snatched by slave traders or separated from their parents by sale at their owners' hands.

In 1737, after Philadelphia Quaker leaders repudiated Lay's first abolitionist tract, *All Slave-keepers, That Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates*, he upped the ante. Bursting into the annual gathering of Quaker leaders, he plunged a sword into a hollowed-out book resembling a Bible that he had filled with a bladder of red pokeberry juice. By splattering Quaker leaders with "blood," he showed them that they committed spiritual and physical

*George S. Brooks, *Friend Anthony Benezet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937), 78.

violence by trading and holding slaves, whether or not they treated them well and taught them Christian principles. Invading the churches of other denominations, Lay carried his case to the public that slavery was "the mother of all sins" until he died in 1759.[52]

Lay did not convince Quakers or anyone else to give up slave keeping, but he lit a torch and passed it on to two other men almost as ascetic as he. In the 1750s, a new generation of Quaker leaders came to believe that the Society of Friends had become lax and corrupt, and they pointed to slavery as evidence of it. Seeing the outbreak of war on Pennsylvania's frontier in 1755 as God's punishment for waywardness, they resolved to cleanse the society of sin. In this situation, abolitionists John Woolman and Anthony Benezet were able to hitch their campaign to ban slave ownership to the more general reform movement. The mild-mannered Woolman, a New Jersey tailor and shopkeeper, had awakened to the sin of slave keeping in the early 1740s, and in 1746 made his first journey to the southern colonies to spread his fear among fellow Quakers that they were losing their conscience. He returned home full of remorse at having eaten and "lodged free-cost with people who lived in ease on the hard labour of their slaves." The way of life he observed among slave owners "appeared to me as a dark gloominess hanging over the land." Eight years later, he published his *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* (1754). Reminding Americans that Africans had not forfeited "the natural right of freedom," he warned that God would rise up and punish a people who engaged in such inhumanity as he saw all around him. Identifying with the Africans themselves, the saintly Woolman said: "[L]et us calmly consider their Circumstance; and, the better to do it, make their Case ours."[53]

Born in France of Huguenot parents, Anthony Benezet rejected a mercantile career and began teaching school for poor children in Philadelphia. In 1750, he began holding free classes for black students in his home and found that they were as capable as white students in both their academic work and in "moral and religious advancement." Benjamin Franklin agreed after visiting a school for black children in 1762. "Their apprehension [is] quick, their memory as strong, and their docility in every respect equal to that of the white children," Franklin wrote. Most Philadelphians probably found it odd that Benezet mixed so readily with the city's benighted blacks and adopted something of a "let-Anthony-do-it" approach. His first eulogist, many years later, recounted how Benezet "would often be seen on the wharves surrounded by a group of these people, whose story afterward served as a basis

for an argument or a touching appeal in one of the almanacs or papers of the day." And so it was as Benezet published pamphlets on Africa and the history of slavery in order to convince Americans that Africa was not a dark continent of savages entitled only to servitude. The foundation for all his labors—the abolition of slavery, justice for Native Americans and the poor, education, pacifism, and temperance—was his abhorrence of wealth. "The great rock against which our society has dashed," he wrote, is "the love of the world and the deceitfulness of riches, the desire of amassing wealth."[54]

With Woolman serving as his ideological compatriot, Benezet published his *Epistle of Caution and Advice Concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves* in 1754. A stirring renunciation of the slave trade and slaveholding as unworthy of liberty-loving Christian colonists, it earned acceptance of the abolitionist position by the Society of Friends Yearly Meeting leaders. Noting that slave ownership had increased rapidly among Quakers, the Yearly Meeting lectured their followers—but really the world at large—that "to live in ease and plenty by the toil of those whom violence and cruelty have put in our power is neither consistent with Christianity nor common justice." This was one of those rare moments in history when an ideological tectonic-plate shift occurred. Occasional outcries against slavery by eccentric Quakers now reached the policy level for an important religious group—the Society of Friends. "Where slave keeping prevails," pronounced the Quakers' Yearly Meeting of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware Friends in 1754, "pure religion and sobriety decline, as it evidently tends to harden the heart and render the soul less susceptible of that holy spirit of love, meekness, and charity, which is the peculiar character of a true Christian."[55]

Over the next twenty years, Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quakers moved from condemning the buying and selling of slaves to forswearing slave ownership. This became a key part of their attempt to revitalize and reform the Quaker commitment to inward purity that they knew had eroded since the days of William Penn. Woolman's second trip through Virginia in 1757 made him the key figure in spreading antislavery principles southward, and he pursued his cause further with another pamphlet in 1762. In *Considerations on Keeping Negroes*, Woolman sounded another note that radical reformers would echo widely in the coming years: that slavery not only outraged humanity but corrupted all white people involved in it. Dominating other humans and treating them brutally was a poor education for a people eager to defend their natural rights and compare their virtuousness with what they

claimed was the treachery and covetousness of English overlords. "What had always been a fantasy of prophets in the Society of Friends," writes historian William McKee Evans, "now became a plan of practical men and women."[56] By the time that plan took form, the intertwining of freedom and slavery, locked together in a deadly embrace, could no longer be ignored.