

## VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Americans of the colonial period were political people. But their political concerns, like their lives, were almost entirely bounded by the parochial concerns of the towns and villages in which they lived and the congregations in which they worshipped. Local issues were fiercely contested: locating churches and highways, setting-off of new towns and parishes, and, after the Great Awakening, quarreling over the doctrinal soundness of ministers. Carried out within communities where everything involved relationships between people who knew one another and in which fundamental values were broadly shared, these kinds of political activities did not require the use of voluntary associations to any great extent. The events leading up to the Revolution would reveal for the first time the potential of voluntary associations as political instrumentalities.

The Great Awakening of the 1740s had laid the groundwork for this: as the conflict between the evangelicals and the ecclesiastical establishment escalated beyond local parishes and itinerant preachers like George Whitfield carried the "good news" from colony to colony, networks of informal communication began to be formed between religious partisans throughout British North America. Benjamin Franklin's journalistic activities also played a role, as he used his post as Postmaster General for the colonies to circulate his newspaper and almanac well beyond Pennsylvania.

But it was the struggle between the English and French for control of North America (1754-63) that played the greatest part in transforming the colonists' sense of who they were. The French and their Indian allies threatened all of the colonies, underlining the extent to which the colonists shared common interests. Moreover, with British generals commanding the colonial militias, who fought side by side with regular troops, the colonists for the first time were able to view and experience themselves as Americans, not merely as residents of particular towns in particular provinces.

At the conclusion of the French and Indian War, the British government, faced with huge debts, began to intensify both their taxation and regulation of colonial commerce. Like the French and Indians, these policies posed a common threat to the interests of the colonies. The Stamp Act, passed by parliament in 1765, imposed a tax on all commercial and legal documents, pamphlets, newspapers, playing cards, and dice, affected almost everyone in the colonies and led to massive and well-coordinated

protests throughout the colonies. Legislatures protested the act, while mobs rioted in the streets of the coastal cities. Delegates from nine of the thirteen colonies met in New York to draft memorials to king and parliament urging repeal and asserting the colonists' rights as Englishmen.

The struggle over the Stamp Act (which was repealed in March of 1766) and over subsequent taxation efforts that were regarded as even more oppressive by colonial leaders did not give rise to formal organizational activity. Communication and coordination remained largely interpersonal -- or was carried out through newspapers and pamphlets. Only in the early 1770s, when the most radical elements began to believe that reconciliation with England was impossible, did voluntary associations begin to be used to any great extent for political purposes.

The revolutionary associations took a number of forms. The Committees of Correspondence, set up early in 1773 to assure regular communication between the leaders of the colonial legislatures, were quasi-official bodies, established by formal legislative act. The Sons of Liberty, on the other hand, were unofficial, privately organized associations of citizens who pledged themselves to resist the British revenue acts. While the Sons were inclusive associations, open to any citizen willing to join the cause, a host of smaller, more exclusive organizations -- clubs with essentially political goals -- were also formed to help galvanize the opinions of community leaders. These appear to have been based on, and often operated in conjunction with the Masons, a fraternal organization which had begun to attract a broad following among the colonial elite by the 1750s.

Despite the fact that these associations ranged in type from quasi-official governmental bodies through private fraternal organizations, like Middletown, Connecticut's Friendly Society, all not only served essentially public and political purposes, but evidently enjoyed the enthusiastic support of nearly all elements in colonial society. Hence the question of associations as instruments of special interests and factions, which would prove to be so troublesome after the Revolution, never arose. Further, because these groups did not require formal corporate frameworks, since they claimed no desire for perpetual succession or the ability to hold property, they could enjoy the wholehearted support of those, like Jefferson, Adams, and Hamilton, whose later differences on these subjects would play an important part in the rise of the first political parties.

## Virginia resolutions establishing a committee of correspondence (12 March 1773)

Whereas, the minds of his Majesty's faithful subjects in this colony have been much disturbed by various rumours and reports of proceedings tending to deprive them of their ancient legal, and constitutional rights.

And whereas, the affairs of this colony are frequently connected with those of Great Britain, as well as of the neighbouring colonies, which renders a communication of sentiments necessary; in order, therefore, to remove the uneasiness and to quiet the minds of the people, as well as for other good purposes above mentioned:

Be it resolved, that a standing committee of correspondence and inquiry be appointed to consist of eleven persons, to wit: the Honourable Peyton Randolph, Esquire; Robert Carter Nicholas, Richard Bland, Richard Henry Lee, Benjamin Harrison, Edmund Pendleton, Patrick Henry, Dudley Digges, Dabney Carr, Archibald Cary, and Thomas Jefferson, Esquires, any six of whom to be a committee, whose business it shall be to obtain the most early and authentic intelligence of all such Acts and resolutions of the British Parliament, or proceedings of administration, as may relate to or affect the British colonies in America, and to keep up and maintain a correspondence and communication with our sister colonies, respecting these important considerations; and the result of such [of] their proceedings, from time to time, to lay before this House.

Resolved, that it be an instruction to the said committee that they do, without delay, inform themselves particularly of the principles and authority on which was constituted a court of inquiry, said to have been lately held in Rhode Island, with powers to transmit persons accused of offenses committed in America to places beyond the seas to be tried.

The said resolutions being severally read a second time, were, upon the question severally put thereupon, [were] agreed to by the House, *nemine contradicente*.

Resolved, that the speaker of this House do transmit to the speakers of the different assemblies of the British colonies on this continent, copies of the said resolutions, and desire

that they will lay them before their respective assemblies, and request them to appoint some person or persons of their respective bodies, to communicate from time to time with the said committee.

### **Resolution of the Massachusetts House of Representatives agreeing to the Virginia Proposal (May 28, 1773)**

Whereas, the speaker hath communicated to this House a letter from the truly respectable House of Burgesses, in his Majesty's ancient colony of Virginia, enclosing a copy of the resolves entered into by them on the 12th of March last, and requesting that a committee of this House may be appointed to communicate, from time to time, with a corresponding committee, then appointed by the said House of Burgesses in Virginia:

And, whereas this House is fully sensible of the necessity and importance of a union of the several colonies in America, at a time when it clearly appears that the rights and liberties of all are systematically invaded; in order that the joint wisdom of the whole may be employed in consulting their common safety:

*Resolved*, that this House have a very grateful sense of the obligations they are under to the House of Burgesses, in Virginia, for the vigilance, firmness and wisdom, which they have discovered, at all times, in support of the rights and liberties of the American colonies; and do heartily concur with their said judicious and spirited resolves.

*Resolved*, that a standing committee of correspondence and enquiry be appointed, to consist of fifteen members, any eight of whom to be a quorum; whose business it shall be to obtain the most early and authentic intelligence of all such Acts and resolutions of the British Parliament. . . .

*Resolved*, that the said committee be further instructed to prepare and report to this House, a draft of a very respectful answer to the letter, received from the speaker of the honourable House of Burgesses in Virginia, and another, to a letter received from the speaker of the honourable House of Representatives, of the colony of Rhode Island; also, a circular letter to the several other houses of assembly on this continent, enclosing the afresaid resolves, and requesting them to lay the same before their respective assemblies, in confidence, that they

will readily and cheerfully comply with the wise and salutary resolves of the House of Burgesses in Virginia.

The formation of intercolonial committees of correspondence by the legislatures encouraged the formation of comparable organizations within the colonies, like the Boston Committee of Correspondence and the New York Committee of Fifty-One. These served to not only to coordinate the activities of revolutionary leaders, but to exert some control over more popularly-based groups like the Sons of Liberty.

### **Association of the Sons of Liberty in New York (December 15, 1773)**

The following association is signed by a great number of the principal gentlemen of the city, merchants, lawyers, and other inhabitants of all ranks, and it is still carried about the city to give an opportunity to those who have not yet signed, to united with their fellow citizens, to testify their abhorrance to the diabolical project of enslaving America.

#### *The Association of the Sons of Liberty of New York*

It is essential to the freedom and security of a free people, that no taxes be imposed upon them but by their own consent, or their representatives. For "What property have they in that which another may, by right, take when he pleases to himself?" The former is the undoubted right of Englishmen, to secure which they expended millions and sacrificed the lives of thousands. And yet, to the astonishment of all the world, and the grief of America, the Commons of Great Britain, after the repeal of the memorable and destable Stamp Act, reassumed the power of imposing taxes on the American colonies; and insisting on it as a necessary badge of parliamentary supremacy, passed a bill, in the seventh year of his present Majesty's reign, imposing duties on all glass, painters' colours, paper, and teas, that should, after the 20th of November, 1767, be "imported from Great Britain into any colony or plantation in America." This bill, after a concurrence of the Lords, obtained the royal assent. And thus

they who, from time immemorial, have exercised the right of giving to, or withholding from the crown, their aids and subsidies, according to their *own free will and pleasure*, signified by their representatives in Parliament, do, by the Act in question, deny us, their brethren in America, the enjoyment of the same right. As this denial, and the execution of that Act, involves our slavery, and would sap the foundation of our freedom, whereby we should become slaves to our brethren and fellow subjects, born to no greater stock of freedom than the Americans -- the merchants and inhabitants of this city, in conjunction with the merchants and inhabitants of the ancient American colonies, entered into an agreement to decline a part of their commerce with Great Britain, until the above mentioned Act should be totally repealed. This agreement operated so powerfully to the disadvantage of the manufacturers of England that many of them were unemployed. To appease their clamours, and to provide subsistence for them, which the non-importation had deprived them of, the Parliament, in 1770, repealed so much of the Revenue Act as imposed a duty on glass, painters' colours, and paper, and left the duty on tea, as *a test of the parliamentary right to tax us*. The merchants of the cities of New York and Philadelphia, having strictly adhered to the agreement, so far as it is related to the importation of articles subject to an American duty, have convinced the ministry, that some other measures must be adopted to execute parliamentary supremacy over this country, and to remove the distress brought on the East India Company, by the ill policy of that Act. Accordingly, to increase the temptation to the shippers of tea from England, an Act of Parliament passed the last session, which gives the whole duty of tea, the company were subject to pay, upon the importation of it into England, to the purchasers and exporters; and when the company have ten millions of pounds of tea in their warehouses exclusive of the quantity they may want to ship, they are allowed to export tea, discharged from the payment of that duty with which they were before chargeable. In hopes of aid in the execution of this project, by the influence of the owners of the American ships, application was made by the company to the captains of those ships to take the tea on freight; but they virtuously rejected it. Still determined on the scheme, they have chartered ships to bring the tea to this country, which may be hourly expected, to make an important trial of our virtue. If they succeed in the sale of that tea, we shall have no property that we can call our own, and then we may bid adieu to American liberty. Therefore, to prevent a calamity which, of all others, is the most to be dreaded --slavery and its terrible concomitants -- we, the subscribers, being influenced from a regard to liberty, and disposed to use all lawful endeavours in our power, to defeat the pernicious project, and to transmit to our posterity those blessings of freedom which our ancestors have handed down to us; and to contribute to the support of the common liberties of America, which are in danger to be subverted, *do*, for those important purposes, agree to

associate together, under the name and style of the *sons of New York*, and engage our honour to, and with each other faithfully to observe and perform the following resolutions, viz.

1st. Resolved, that whoever shall aid or abet, or in any manner assist, in the introduction of tea from any place whatsoever, into this colony, while it is subject, by a British Act of Parliament, to the payment of a duty, for the purpose of raising a revenue in America, he shall be deemed an enemy to the liberties of America.

2d. Resolved, that whoever shall be aiding, or assisting, in the landing, or carting of such tea, from any ship, or vessel, or shall hire any house, storehouse, or cellar or any place whatsoever, to deposit the tea, subject to a duty as aforesaid, he shall be deemed an enemy to the liberties of America.

3d. Resolved, that whoever shall sell, or buy, or in any manner contribute to the sale, or purchase of tea, subject to a duty as aforesaid, or shall aid, or abet, in transporting such tea, by land or water, from this city, until the 7th George III, chap. 46, commonly called the Revenue Act, shall be totally and clearly repealed, he shall be deemed an enemy to the liberties of America.

4th. Resolved, that whether the duties on tea, imposed by this Act, be paid in Great Britain or America, our liberties are equally affected.

5th. Resolved, that whoever shall transgress any of these resolutions, we will not deal with, or employ, or have any connection with him.

The role of the Sons of Liberty organizations was testified to by the prompt action of the Boston chapter on the day after the New York association was formed. The first tea ship had arrived in the city's harbor on November 27, 1773. Citizens met in the towns surrounding Boston, affirming that the duty would not be paid and demanding that the ship return to England. Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson ordered that such meetings be dispersed, but was ignored. On December 16, in response to the announcement of a mass meeting, aroused citizens began converging on Boston. As they were meeting, the report came that Governor Hutchinson had ordered warships in the harbor to prevent the tea ship's departure. Evidently, he intended to force the unloading and sale of its cargo. This report from a Boston newspaper of December 23, 1773, describes what transpired:

Report from the *Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Weekly News-letter*, December 23, 1773

Just before the dissolution of the meeting, a number of brave and resolute men, dressed in the Indian manner, approached near the door of the Assembly, gave the war whoop, which rang through the house and was answered by some in the galleries, but silence being commanded, and a peaceable deportment was again enjoined till the dissolution. The Indians, as they were called, repaired to the wharf where the ships lay that had the tea on board, and were followed by hundreds of people to see the event of the transactions of those who made so

grotesque an appearance. They, the Indians, immediately repaired on board Capt. Hall's ship, where they hoisted out the chests of tea, and when upon deck stove the chests and emptied the tea overboard; having cleared this ship, they proceeded to Capt. Bruce's and then to Capt, Coffin's brig. They applied themselves so dextrously to the destruction of this commodity that in the space of three hours they broke up 342 chests, which was the whole number in those vessels, and discharged their contents into the dock. When the tide rose it floated the broken chests and the tea insomuch that the surface of the water was filled therewith a considerable way from the south part of the town to Dorchester Neck, and lodged on the shores, There was the greatest care taken to prevent the tea from being purloined by the populace. ONE or tow, being detected in endeavouring to pocket a small quantity, were stripped of their acquisitions and very roughly handled. It is worthy of remark that although a considerable quantity of goods were still remaining on board the vessels, no injury was sustained. Such attention to private property was observed, that a small padlock belonging to the captain of one of the ships being broke, another was procured and sent to him. The town was very quiet during the whole evening and night following. Those persons who were from the country returned with a merry heart; and the next day joy appeared in almost every countenance, some on occasion of the destruction of the tea, others on account of the quietness with which it was effected. One of the Monday's papers says that the masters and owners are well pleased that their ships are thus cleared.

The following letter from the Lieutenant Governor of New York to the Earl of Dartmouth suggests the difficulty contemporary observers encountered in classifying the organizations that were emerging to pursue revolutionary political goals. Historically within the English political tradition, the struggle for liberty had been conducted between king and parliament, recognized governmental entities. The idea of the people assembling themselves in committees and mass meetings without governmental sanction to express the popular will was without parallel.

### **Letter from Lieutenant-Governor Colden to the Earl of Dartmouth, June 1, 1774**

The Act of Parliament shutting up the port of Boston was brought to this place by a merchant vessel a few days before I received it from your lordship's office.

The Act was immediately published in all our newspapers and was the subject of all conversation. I knew that people universally in this colony had received such ideas of being taxed at the pleasure of Parliament, that I was particularly anxious upon this occasion to discover the sentiments of those who might have the most influence over others, and was assured by the gentlemen of the Council and others of weight in the city, that no means would be omitted to prevent hot-headed people taking any measures that might endanger the peace and quiet of the colony.

The men who at that time called themselves the committee, who dictated and acted in the name of the people, were many of them of the lower rank, and all the warmest zealots of those called the Sons of Liberty. The more considerable merchants and citizens seldom or never appeared among them, but I believe were not displeased with the clamour and opposition that was shown against internal taxation by Parliament.

The principal inhabitants, being now afraid that these hot-headed men might run the city into dangerous measures, appeared in a considerable body at the first meeting of the people after the Boston Port Act was published here. They dissolved the former committee and appointed a new one of fifty-one persons, in which care was taken to have a number of the most prudent and considerate people of the place. Some of them have not before joined in the public proceedings of the opposition, and were induced to appear in what they are sensible is an illegal character, from a consideration that if they did not, the business would be left in the same rash hands as before.

Letters had been received from Boston with an invitation from that town to the sister colonies immediately to come into a resolution to refrain from any commerce with Great Britain and the West India Islands till the Act for shutting up the port of Boston was repealed. . . .

I am informed that the new committee in their answer to Boston have given them no reason to expect that the merchants of this place will adopt so extravagant a measure, and people with whom I converse assure me that they think it cannot be brought about by the most zealous advocates of opposition. As yet no resolutions have been taken by the people of the colony, and the cool, prudent men will endeavour to keep measures in suspense till they have an opportunity of adopting the best. I am told that they have proposed that the colonies be invited to send deputies to meet together, in order to petition the king for redress of grievances, and to deliberate upon some plan whereby the jealousies between Great Britain and her colonies may be removed. It is allowed by the intelligent among them that these assemblies of the people, without authority of government, are illegal, and may be dangerous, but they deny that they are unconstitutional when a national grievance cannot otherwise be removed. What resolution will be taken I cannot as yet say. The government of this province has no coercive power over these assemblies of the people, but the authority of the magistrates in all other cases is submitted to as usual.

## **REVOLUTION IN THE BACKCOUNTRY: THE FRIENDLY SOCIETY OF MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT**

On the surface, the "Friendly Society" appears to be what it claims to be: an institution "for the promoting of Sociability, Good Humour, and innocent Cheerfulness." But the date of its organization, in the midst of the intensifying crisis in relations between England and the colonies, together with the fact that the club disbanded in March of 1775, when its organizers -- who included Samuel B. Webb and Return Jonathan Meigs -- marched off to volunteer for service under Washington at Bunker Hill or sailed off in command of privateers, suggests that politics must have dominated the group's concerns.

Middletown, strategically situated on the Connecticut River, was the major entrepot for cattle, grain, lumber and others goods headed for the West Indies. The

location of one of the colony's first Anglican missions, the town had more than its share of British sympathizers. The Friendly Society, operating under the cover of being a social club, doubtless played a role in local struggles between the town's revolutionary factions.

### **By-laws of the Friendly Society of Middletown, Connecticut (1774)**

We the Subscribers hereby mutually promise and agree to and with each other; for the purposes of promoting Sociability, Good Humour, and innocent Cheerfulness; to form and incorporate ourselves into a Society or Body. -- and to facilitate the attainment of these desirable Ends; We do in full Meeting and upon Mature Deliberation; enact and ordain the following Regulations or Laws, subject to such Addition, Alteration, or Amendment; as this Society shall Judge most conducive to the End & Design of the Institution.

That the Name by which this Body, will incorporate and stile themselves is, and shall be the Friendly Society.--

That this Society will convene, and meet on Thursday Evening Weekly at Mr. Timothy Bigelow's Tavern in Middletown, at 7 o'clock and depart decently at 9 o'Clock pm.

That the Sum that each Individual of this Society shall expend, on each Convention Evening, shall not exceed two shillings & six pence lawful money.--

That each member of this Society shall pay fourpence lawful money ev'ry four Weeks into the Treasurer of this Society for the purpose of raising a Fund to be appropriated to such charitable Use as this Society shall direct.--

That when any person shall apply for Admission as a member into this Society; a sixth part of the members then present voting against his admission -- shall be sufficient to exclude him.--

That the sentiments of this Society relative to any matter about which, they shall vote, shall be by Ballot/--

That such members of this Society shall have liberty to introduce his Friends -- when they may happen in Town; provided, they pay their Club, or proportionable part of the expenses of the Entertainment, that shall be provided when they are present.--

That for the future when any person shall be admitted as a member of this Society, he shall on his admission, advance and pay to the Treasurer, his proportionable part of the Fund or Stock that shall then be collected, and undispos'd of by this Society.--

That Captain Samuel Willis, Jun<sup>r</sup> be president of this Society from Thursday the 3<sup>d</sup> day of March for 4 Weeks then next ensuing.--

That Nath<sup>l</sup> Shaler be appointed Vice president of this Society.--

That Willard Wright be Treasurer of this Society.--

That whatsoever shall be said or transacted in meeting by this Body, shall not be mention'd out of it, to the prejudice or Injury of this Society,-- any member of it -- and we do hereby solemnly engage and promise on our Honours, punctually to observe this Vote.

FebY 24th: 1774

The Friendly Society held its last meeting on February 21, 1776, just before the Connecticut volunteers marched off to join Washington on Dorchester Heights outside of Boston. Major Return Jonathan Meigs, a founder of the Society, commanded a company of Middletown Light Infantry, which included fellow member Jabez Hamlin, who died in the Army a few months later. Society member Colonel Samuel B. Webb commanded a company of volunteers from nearby Wethersfield; he fought at Bunker Hill and, by 1776, was a member of Washington's staff; in the summer of 1778, while leading a raiding party upon Tory settlements on Long Island, he was captured by the British and held for three years as a prisoner. General George Phillips, another founding member, was the leader of Middletown's revolutionary committee, in charge of

administering oaths of allegiance to the patriotic cause. Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth became one of Connecticut's most outstanding revolutionary leaders.

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