IGNITING INDEPENDENCE

Pyrophobia and Crowd Action in Eighteenth Century Boston

An honors thesis for the Department of History

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INTRODUCTION

Political Mobilization Through Fire

One of the most predominant fears in America in the eighteenth century was of fire. An equalizer of all social classes and economic strata in its wake, fire surged through Boston on numerous occasions. The city of Boston experienced more conflagrations than any other American city during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and despite the government's continued efforts at fire-proofing the city, fire was a continued threat. At the same time, Boston could not survive without fire, and fire was used at every stage of Boston's development as a metropolis. Colonists needed fire for warmth, food preparation, expanding their towns, and producing goods for sale. Ministers and political leaders both used incendiary images, and fire became a symbol for Americans' unrest and their passion for liberty.

Fire was terrifying unto itself, and colonists also feared the use of fire as a weapon. Given the unpredictable nature of fire, anyone who could control it was particularly dangerous. People blamed many fires on arsonists, sometimes believing that these fire setters played a role in a vast conspiracy to destroy a city. Slaves were forbidden to build bonfires, and British officials saw large fires as a means of gathering colonial mobs. Given American and British fears, fires started to inspire and spread conspiracy theories. American paranoia encompassed a fear of fire and its malevolent uses. Both Americans and Britons were painfully aware of the Great Fire of London in 1666, and how Londoners reacted to the fire. People compared many fires in Boston to the Great Fire of London (most notably the fire of 1760), and London's catastrophe certainly heightened American and British fear of fire and resulting paranoia. Not only did fire prompt such fear, but colonists relied on fires to spread these ideas and news. Fires aided mass-communications across Boston—the crowd that gathered at the Boston Massacre, for example,

used the cry of "Fire!" as a pretense for assembling. Sometimes small, contained fires served as colonists' only means of communicating information across vast distances. Paul Revere's reliance on lanterns to signal the arrival of British troops is perhaps the most recognized example of such communication. Shakespeare even acknowledged the pervasiveness of fires as messages in Britain: "The news, Rogero? Nothing but bonfires."[1]

Bernard Bailyn, in his introduction to a collection of Revolutionary pamphlets, examines "the assumptions, beliefs, and ideas that lay behind the manifest events of the time." He specifically looks at the pamphlet writers' stirring and emotional language, the rhetoric that prior historians had dismissed as propaganda. Considering these ideas "reflected so clearly the realities of life" for the colonists, Bailyn "began to suspect that they meant something very real to both the writers and their readers: that these were real fears, real anxieties, a sense of real danger behind these phrases, and not merely the desire to influence by rhetoric and propaganda the inert minds of an otherwise passive populace." Furthermore, "the rioters, among whom were many substantial townsmen and well as crowds of workmen, far from being empty vessels, shared actively the attitudes and fears of the political and intellectual leaders of the Revolutionary movement." The fluid, changing ideas surrounding the Revolution signified how "the movement of thought was rapid, irreversible, and irresistible" to the colonists. Revolutionary leaders knew that "the familiar meaning of ideas and words faded away into confusion, and leaders felt themselves peering into a haze, seeking to bring shifting conceptions somehow into focus." This confusion made it crucial for leaders to use language with which the colonists would readily

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[1] David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England*, (Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1989), 68-69, 80-81; William Shakespeare, *A Winter's Tale*, Howard Stauton, ed., (New York: Henry L. Hinton, Publisher, 1870), 245.

identify; this uncertainty is why the use of fire as a symbol helped unify crowds under a common emotion or for a common goal.[2]

Bailyn analyzes a multitude of Revolutionary pamphlets, and examines colonial feelings about such concepts as slavery and threats to liberty, ideas that scared pamphlet writers and readers. As Gordon Wood argues, Bailyn's study illustrates how ideas helped shape Revolutionary society. He further notes that as a result of this way of thinking, the issue of motivating the colonists during protests and determining responsibility for that motivation becomes irrelevant. Ideas constantly shifted in a way that prevents historians from conclusively affiliating ideas with single individuals—rather, the sequence of ideas are phenomena, not propaganda, leading the colonists in a way they may not have previously thought possible.[3]

Fire exemplified this concept of shifting ideology, and certainly affected the actions of Revolutionary protestors and government supporters. While perhaps a less obvious theme than slavery and other familiar concepts, fire was a source of real danger, and when American rhetoric evoked images of conflagrations and uncontrollable incendiaries, the colonists paid attention. When leaders linked the fear of fire to perceived threats from the government, political concerns became even more real for the colonists. Building upon Bailyn, this study seeks to focus specifically on the force of the ideas surrounding fire, looking at how these ideas helped shape the American Revolution and subsequently, American society. These feelings about fire, arson, and conspiracy stemmed not just from the colonial social structure, but the colonists' real life experiences—many of which tangibly justified the colonists' fears. Because colonists directly experienced fire damage but did not yet have first-hand experience with other

[2] Bernard Bailyn, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), vii, ix, 140, 169, 583.
[3] Gordon Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," *Essays on the American Revolution*, David L. Jacobson, ed., (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970), 58-59.

revolutionary symbols, such as slavery or a removal of their liberties, Bailyn's argument can extend a step further, and we can examine how colonists' actual experiences with fire influenced Revolutionary ideology, and then how that ideology affected the colonists' behavior.

But why fire? Over time, colonists developed the dangers of fire into a symbol for the Revolution, and even government supporters used the symbol to describe the colonists' behavior. Revolutionaries' appropriation of a symbol is not a new concept. In his book, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution*, historian Alfred Young discusses how the Liberty Tree developed as an icon for the colonists "with a speed that suggests it filled some deep unmet need for symbolic representation of the American cause."[4] He illustrates how the tree entered the visual and political vocabulary of the revolt, and how it developed into a metaphor for injuries caused by the British and opposition to British rule throughout the revolutionary period.[5] Colonists needed symbolism to legitimize the revolutionary movement, and the symbol of fire further helped to codify the colonists' protests. Fire adeptly symbolized many of these events, and provided colonists with a tangible symbol that they could rally behind. Revolutionary leaders used fire and the threat of fire to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies; bonfires and fire bells catalyzed already tense situations and helped channel pre-existing conflicts into crowd actions. When such crowds used fire to their own advantage, a cycle of psychological warfare started to develop.

Fire symbolism can be found in many Revolutionary documents, and Revolutionary leaders used this terminology frequently. Samuel Adams, in a letter to James Warren in 1772, tried to alleviate Warren's concerns about the state of the movement: "All are not dead; and

[4] Alfred F. Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 354.
[5] Ibid., 354-377.

where there is a Spark of patriotick fire, *we* will enkindle it."[6] Adams previously warned Warren that "we must exert ourselves to awaken our Country men to a Sense of the danger they are in of immediate and perhaps irrecoverable Ruin."[7] Adams in particular believed that it was his job and the job of others like him to alert the colonists to British threats, and to rouse and maintain the colonists' metaphorical "patriotick fire." Fire served as an apt analogy—man could kindle it, encourage it to grow and spread, and could effectively use it as a highly destructive force.

Abigail Adams used similar language when writing to Mercy Warren in 1773, during the tea crisis: "You will there find that the proceedings of our Citizens have been united spirited and firm. The flame is kindled and like lightening it catches from Soul to Soul. Great will be the devastation if not timely quenched or allayed by some more lenient measures."[8] Warren, in 1774, actually wrote a poem in honor of the Boston Tea Party, describing it "as a squabble among the Celestials of the sea." A goddess features in one verse and uses fire to fight fire: "A Flaming Torch she took in Either Hand, And as fell Discord Reign'd throughout the Land, Was well appriz'd the Centaurs would Conspire, Resolv'd to set the No'thern World on Fire." Before the "centaurs" (presumably representing the British) incite total devastation on the "No'thern World," she wrote, "First let Chinesean Herbage Feed the Flames."[9] The tea sent to Boston never suffered this fate, but Warren still felt that fire and burning represented the current conflict. Both women were concerned about the fate of America and worried that a war would result. Abigail Adams used the metaphorical flame to try to alleviate Mercy Warren's concerns, to describe the revolutionary fervor among those in Boston. They saw evidence of this "flame" in

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[6] Samuel Adams to James Warren, December 9, 1772. *Warren-Adams Letters: Being chiefly a correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren*, Massachusetts Historical Society, ed., (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1917), 1: 14.
[7] Samuel Adams to James Warren, November 27, 1772, Ibid., 1: 14.
[8] Abigail Adams to Mercy Warren, December 5, 1773, Ibid., 1: 18.
[9] Mercy Otis Warren to Abigail Adams, with a Poem on the Boston Tea Party, February 27, 1774, *Adams Family Correspondence*, L.H. Butterfield, ed., (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1963), 1: 99-102.

patriotic pamphlets, anti-British articles in the newspapers, and protests around the city. They both also may have heard the terminology from their husbands and other leaders, who readily used the metaphor when describing their feelings and the popular resistance.

Not only was the image of flames or a fire of liberty used by revolutionaries themselves, but loyalists also considered revolutionaries' beliefs and actions to result from an internalized fire. Government supporters and British officials described colonists as "incendiaries" and "firebrands", documents calling others to action were deemed "incendiary" or the kind that "inflamed" the colonists, and often referred to such people and papers as the kind that kindled, expanded, and stirred the fire already within the colonists. The author of a letter sent to Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson from London dated April 11, 1767, sympathized with Hutchinson after the Massachusetts Assembly refused to submit to the authority of the British Parliament and illustrated his concern over the Bostonians' revolutionary discussions: "Lord Mansfield, yesterday, in the house of lords, made one of the finest speeches I ever heard, upon the wickedness and folly of your incendiaries, who, against the conviction of their own minds, are endeavoring to raise jealousies and to alienate the affections of his majesty's subjects in America from his government here."[10] The fact that the author of this letter referred to the members of Boston mobs as "incendiaries" links the language used in Boston to that used back in Britain.

Fire terminology had spread to the mother country. Peter Oliver also observed the increasing unrest that followed the Boston Massacre, saying that "[t]he Sparks of it had been

[10] Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, ed. Lawrence Shaw Mayo, 3 vols (Cambridge: Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936), 3: 124. Mansfield learned the real meaning of "incendiaries" in 1780, when a crowd burnt down his house during the Gordon Riots.

long hovering, but they were now collected into a Focus, & burst into Flame."[11] He too was taken with the metaphor of the flame, and used it to describe the mounting tensions between the soldiers and the inhabitants. Provincial agent William Bollan also used this symbolism when he wrote to Hutchinson in October 1765, advising him to maintain "decent conduct and proper representation of all your grievances, [since] every minister has a bucket in each hand to extinguish those flames which the mistakes of some and the madness of others are daily increasing."[12] Government supporters recognized the colonists' literal and figurative fires, particularly the actual fires set during the 1760s, and knew that they had to take action to prevent these flames from spreading. Tensions between revolutionaries and government supporters mounted due the prior uses of bonfires during crowd activities, since the fire rhetoric echoed in real life.

The concept of "inflaming" or "enkindling" crowds was also prevalent among non-leaders. Ann Hulton, the sister of Boston Commissioner of Customs Henry Hulton, wrote a friend that "it's true we have long been in a dangerous situation, from the State of Government. The want of protection, the perversion of the Laws & the spirit of the People, inflamed by designing men."[13] Not only is Hulton referring to the crowds as being inflamed, but she felt those inflaming the colonists did so deliberately. Thomas Hutchinson also used the phrase "designing men" to categorize those whom he believed incited riots. Many people felt that crowds developed and engaged in troublesome activities when they were "inflamed", either by those within their ranks or outside leaders. People easily compared crowds to bonfires—both

[11] Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz, ed., *Peter Oliver's Origins & Progress of the American Revolution: A Tory View*, (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1963), 88.
[12] William Bollan to Thomas Hutchinson, October 14, 1765, *The Hutchinson Papers* (Massachusetts Historical Society), 37.
[13] Ann Hulton, *Letters of a Loyalist Lady: Being the Letters of Ann Hulton, sister of Henry Hulton, Commissioner of Customs at Boston, 1767-1776*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 22.

start by a single action (or spark) and quickly expand and become threatening. Government supporters believed an individual's metaphorical "internal flame" could be "stoked" by leaders, inciting that individual to rebel against the British government. The issue of "designing" individuals and crowd action will be discussed in a later section, but it is worth noting that people frequently described this issue in "incendiary" terms. Fire provided an apt metaphor for government supporters. Crowd actions (and conspiracy theories) mimicked those of a fire—spreading rapidly, often with no chance of determining the source or stopping it. Mobs were as difficult to control as fires, and could be just as deadly to those in their paths.

Other towns shared Boston's frustration with British activities, and relied on fire symbolism to express their own concerns and mounting revolutionary fervor. A gentleman in Newport, Rhode Island, wrote to the *Boston Post-Boy* in September of 1765 to inform its readers that "The Flames of Patriotism seems to communicate from Boston Westward; we have been in one continual Riot this three Days." This writer described the burning of effigies and the destruction of the mob's enemies' houses.[14] He credited Boston as the origin of the "Flames of Patriotism", and those in Newport mimicked Boston's use of fire to express their own distress over the Stamp Act. Not only was the Bostonians' fire spreading to Britain, but it was spreading to all of the colonies. Other colonies, in response, used fire to their own advantage and to further the revolutionary movement.

Fires themselves carried significance in colonial society. In Britain and later in the colonies, bonfires appeared in conjunction with bell ringing to commemorate important occasions, encourage festivities, and celebrate the reception of good news. Historian David Cressy notes that bonfires, being "dangerous and exciting", provided a visual focus for a crowd and a mechanism for all echelons of societies to participate in the crowd action. Everyone was

[14] *Boston Post-Boy*, September 2, 1765.

physically able to produce a fire before their own doorways, and when people worked together to light fires, the resulting inferno could be quite impressive. Some bonfires were officially sanctioned by royalty; Henry VII, for instance, constantly provided funding for the Midsummer Eve "king's bonfire." Fires organized by parishes or larger groups would often include more than just lit wood to foster a celebration—sometimes gunpowder or sacks of live cats would be used in addition to wood to make the fire seem more impressive and lend an added aural component to the celebration. "The number, disposition, combustion, luminosity, danger and excitement of bonfires varied," Cressy explains, and notes how different sorts of bonfires sent unique messages to those who saw them. Furthermore, he asks: "Who authorized their construction, who tended them, where did the fuel come from, and what did people understand by them?"[15]

An interdisciplinary approach is useful in determining how people viewed fire and perhaps why fire played such a vital role in protests. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard has examined the psychology of fire, trying to explain how fire captures the imagination and how fire imagery has contributed to society. He looks at the myriad of fire mythology present in all cultures, and tracks how those myths contributed to later behavior and perceptions. "Fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter," he writes, "it magnifies human destiny; it links the small to the great, the hearth to the volcano, the life of a log to the life of the world. The fascinated individual hears the call of the funeral pyre. For him destruction is more than a change, it is renewal."[16]

While Bachelard's descriptions may be a bit lofty, it is plausible that fire evoked many of the emotions he identifies within the eighteenth-century individual. Setting a fire enabled a person to handle both a life-force and a force of mass destruction; seeing a fire, especially a

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[15] Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells*, 68-69, 80-81.
[16] Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Alan C. M. Ross, trans., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 16.

larger bonfire, might call to mind that imagery. Additionally, Bachelard argues that "fire is more a *social reality* than a *natural reality*."[17] People did not simply recognize fire as dangerous, but others instilled this fear of fire in them (for example, parental figures), and these figures taught them the consequences of interacting with flames. In this way, people gained an additional appreciation for fire when it was connected to protests and crowd activities.

In the eighteenth century, people had only a vague understanding of fire and its properties. As late as 1787, Benjamin Franklin believed that fire "exists everywhere in the state of a subtile fluid." He felt that "too much of the fluid in our flesh gives us the sensation we call heat; too little, cold; its vibrations, light; that all solid or fluid substances which are inflammable, have been composed of it; their dissolution in returning to their original fluid state, we call fire."[18] The idea of fire as a fluid contained in all humans and animals lent itself to later fire symbolism—particularly the idea that metaphorical fire could be contained within a person. Further, while Franklin and other scientists understood fire as something that existed within the individual, fire was also understood to exist within the social collective—the crowd. Most people had a working definition of fire, and when fire became a weapon or a signal for large groups, bonfires gained added significance. Further, people began to connect fire to social and political movements and crowd actions, and their alarm amplified. In order to fully understand crowd action in Revolutionary Boston, one must analyze particular protests and place the colonists' fire usage into context.

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[17] Ibid., 10.
[18] Benjamin Franklin to Benjamin Vaughan, April 29, 1784, *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin*, John Bigelow, ed., vol. 8, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1888), 472.

"WHILE LONDON BURNED"
A Developing Fear of Fire, 1666-1711

Much of Americans' concern about fire can be traced back to British conflagrations, particularly the Great Fire of London in 1666. The colonists were quite familiar with this major fire, and later compared their own experiences with fire to London's experience. After this conflagration and others in Boston, the townspeople first looked to God for an explanation, and then quickly turned on each other. In 1666, the Great Fire traumatized Londoners. As Cynthia Wall argues, the Great Fire "specifically heightened a larger sense of cultural, religious, and political insecurity."[19] It forced Londoners to notice and confront preexisting societal and urban issues. Wall tracks the rhetoric describing the fire and its aftermath, specifically noting differences between accounts. The first official descriptions of the fire discuss the physical impact of the flames and the devastation left in its wake, usually describing the fire as being accidental. The destruction so overwhelmed townspeople that they became depressed and disoriented. Samuel Pepys remarked how he was so distraught that he "had forgot almost the day of the week."[20] Quickly, though, narratives shifted to include possible causes of the fire, looking specifically for moral, political, or religious conspiracies to explain the recent events. Minister Robert Elborough and Preacher Thomas Brooks were convinced that the fire occurred because Londoners broke the Sabbath.[21]

Another popular theory revolved around the observation that the fire broke out in an area predominantly populated by Roman Catholic Frenchmen and Dutchmen. Protestants immediately considered these people, both foreigners and Catholics, suspect, relying on

[19] Cynthia Wall, *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.
[20] Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), VII, 277.
[21] Wall, *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*, 6-10.

preconceived stereotypes and conflicts. As historian Adrian Tinniwood explains, "It is hard for us to understand the irrational fear and loathing with which English Protestants regarded Catholics during the late 1670s. Paranoia spread through society like fire. A maid was hanged for burning a house in Southwark as part of a Catholic plot; packs of playing cards were distributed showing Jesuits offering money to people to burn down buildings; prints circulated with an image of the Pope spewing flames from his mouth while London burned." As was their habit, Londoners blamed Catholics for starting the fire of 1666.[22]

Monday morning after fire, the Earl of Clarendon determined that people started to suspect that "this fire came not by chance." Londoners were so eager to identify a culprit and blame someone for the blaze that they started attacking each other, especially since "there seemed to be no shortage of evidence for a well-planned conspiracy to burn down the metropolis." As the conflagration raged, a crowd of terrified residents discovered a woman carrying chickens in her apron in hopes of saving the birds from the flames. They accused her of carrying fireballs, assaulted her, and cut off her breasts. A constant stream of Londoners later came forward to claim they each saw a suspicious person somewhere in the city that night, or saw an incendiary device. Other people were attacked, but there was no evidence to support the conspiracy theories until Robert Hubert, a watchmaker from Normandy, admitted to helping start the great conflagration. He told an extraordinary story of how he and a gang of twenty-four other incendiaries started the fire, and he himself threw a fireball near the Palace of Whitehall. Authorities repeatedly asked Hubert about the details of his plan, but his story constantly changed. Tinniswood describes how, "in spite of London's real need to believe that the Fire was an act of malice rather than an act of God, there was considerable disquiet over Hubert's story."

[22] Ibid., 6-10; Adrian Tinniswood, *By Permission of Heaven: The True Story of the Great Fire of London*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 58, 266.

Further, although most Londoners and government officials doubted Hubert's guilt, a jury still convicted him of various crimes and sentenced him to death "because the jury saw how determined he was." Even after Hubert's confession and execution, conspiracy theories continued to circulate. By the time London finally stopped looking for answers and blaming others for the fire, thirty-five people had been "executed for their parts in a non-existent conspiracy."[23] Americans heard from friends and family about the Great Fire of London, and learned all about the fire's devastation and supposedly conspiratorial origins. With the terrors of the Great Fire dancing in their heads, Americans started seeing conspiracies in their own communities, especially in the presence of mysterious fires.

While arson was a major concern in both American and European communities, it was difficult to prosecute. According to historian Bernard Capp, only one of the 1,631 crimes recorded in East Sussex between 1592 and 1640 involved arson. Capp argues that this lack of records can be explained by one of two theories: either arson was so despised in society and the punishments so severe that punitive measures discouraged potential arsonists from setting fires, or officials found it troublesome to find arsonists and successfully prosecute them when impeached. The increasing severity of English laws against arson indicates that leaders found the crime intolerable. Some people unsuccessfully attempted to transform these representations of unrest into more structured forms of disputes as opposed to arson, but fire-setting still occurred. "Despite the paucity of court records," Capp writes, "contemporaries knew that a candle and wisp of stray were enough to give any disgruntled individual a terrifying power of life and death. Their fears were well founded." The fear of unbridled incendiaries that had the means to set a fire traversed across different levels of society, and all knew that these people could strike at any

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[23] Wall, *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*, 10; Tinniswood, *By Permission of Heaven*, 155, 163-168, 267.

moment. Although fires could sometimes be explained, they often prompted the same communal reactions as accusations of witchcraft did, and both frequently resulted in mass hysteria. Most fires were determined to be accidental, but during periods of national unrest and social disagreement, allegations of arson grew more prevalent. Despite harsh British laws and equivalents in American colonies, frustrated or psychotic individuals continued to set fires. What is most interesting is that, despite these laws and a community hatred of incendiaries and conflagrations, both British and American crowds continued kindling bonfires as a means of protest and celebration. People clearly viewed fire-setting as acceptable in certain situations but not in others.[24]

Scholar André Abbiateci studies arson in eighteenth-century France, particularly the use of fire by peasants during the Great Fear of 1789, and attempts to explain why fire was seen as both positive and negative. This paradox illuminates why fire was such an effective weapon. Abbiateci examines the arsonists' backgrounds, noting the individuals' language, use of intimidation, and preference of setting fires alone as opposed to with accomplices. These peasants' threats mimicked their rural rhetoric to scare their victims into submission prior to starting a fire: arsonists ranged from those attempting to extort money from others to farmers protesting evictions to those later declared insane. Their threats and motives reflected powerful influences within their communities. The one common connection between them was their complex view of fire—the peasants recognized it as a formidable force of destruction, but also as a means of celebration. Despite fire's dual role in rural French society, people took threats of arson seriously. "Because of the fear it aroused," Abbiateci concludes, "fire could be used to

[24] Bernard Capp, "Arson, Threats of Arson, and Incivility in Early Modern England," *Civil Histories: Essays Presented to Sir Keith Thomas*, ed. Peter Burke, Brian Harrison, and Paul Slack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 198-199, 207, 211-213.

apply social pressure…Fire was used to apply pressure by every stratum of society."[25] Fire's usage in France mirrors its usage in America and Britain during the same century. While the urban settings of Boston and London certainly differed from rural France, anxiety about fire was just as prevalent. As in France, people quickly recognized the concern they shared with their peers, and learned to use it to their advantage.

Colonists frequently had no idea why fires were set, or how buildings came to be emblazed. Almost all colonists experienced small house fires, and while these were easily extinguished, they still posed a grave threat to a resident's property and any nearby buildings. In 1709, Samuel Sewall wrote in his diary after a fire that occurred in his house, and speculated on its origins: "We imagine a mouse might have taken our lighted candle out of the candle-stick and hearth and drag it under my closet door behind the box of wafers." While the prospect of an incendiary rodent is highly unlikely, it seems Sewall and his wife had no other plausible idea of how the fire started, especially considering the source—a blazing box of wafers in his bedroom closet that was far away from any candle. He also refused to let anyone cry "fire" and ask neighbors for help, instead choosing to try to put it out himself. He reacted to several small fires within his house in this manner. Perhaps Sewall was responding to his wife's fear and showed his manly prowess by extinguishing the fires himself.[26]

Not all fires started (or ended) so innocently. In the late 1670s, people deemed several fires of unknown origin to be the deliberate work of incendiaries. Colonists discovered candles attached to the outsides of buildings, and when the candles burnt through the houses' roofs or walls, the entire building would catch fire. "Judging from the methods adopted," Arthur Brayley

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[25] André Abbiateci, "Arsonists in Eighteenth-Century France: An Essay in the Typology of Crime," *Deviants and the Abandoned in French Society, Selections from the Annales Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, Robert Foster and Orest Ranum, ed., vol. 4, (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 157-176.
[26] Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, vol. 2, (Boston: Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 1878), 258-259.

wrote, “they were the studied plans of some secret and determined gang of ‘fire-bugs.’”[27] It is unknown if these fires were related, but the use of candles as a means of starting fires seemed to connect the incidents. As a result of the increasing number of candles being found, the General Court passed an act relating how “many secret attempts have been made by evil-minded persons to set fire to the town of Boston and other places tending to the destruction and devastation of the whole; this Court doth account it their duty to use all lawful means to discover such persons, and prevent the like for time to come.” The Court further asked that all of Boston’s inhabitants and constables help look out for these “fire-bugs” and prevent any further action on their part.[28]

When flames set by arsonists began to ignite nearby buildings, Bostonians became even more alarmed. The most impressive of these fires occurred on August 8, 1679, when a fire kindled in the outhouse of an ale-house spread to several warehouses and eighty dwelling-houses. The single fire company could not successfully extinguish the conflagration. After the fire eventually died, landowners had particular difficultly determining where their properties began and ended, since the fire burnt all landmarks along with the owners’ property. After people saw the vast ramifications of such a blaze, they worried more and more about the town’s welfare. Leadership exiled those “under vehement suspicion of attempting to burn the town of Boston”, but consternation among the inhabitants remained. Based on their knowledge of the 1666 London fire and their own experiences with inexplicable blazes, it seemed as if Boston was in constant danger.[29]

As a result of their pyrophobia, the citizens of Boston appointed a committee on August 18, 1679 to draft orders to preserve the safety of the town in the face of conflagrations. The

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[27] Arthur Wellington Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department, Including the Fire-Alarm Service and the Protective Department, From 1630-1888*, (Boston: John P. Dale & Co., Publishers, 1889), 14.
[28] Ibid., 14.
[29] Ibid., 15-19.

resulting orders involved the development of Boston's Board of Firewards, dividing the town into units so that fires could be more easily handled. Penalties for those convicted of arson increased, and leaders attempted to regulate the use of flammable building materials. An examination of Massachusetts' records from 1630 to 1692 illustrates "that only nine of the twenty-five capital laws were invoked to cut short a human life: witchcraft, murder, bestiality, adultery, rape, arson, defiance by Quakers, piracy, and treason." People considered arson dangerous enough to be included in this list.[30] Despite these measures, "fire-bugs" continued their work, but the damage was less wide-spread. As Peter Charles Hoffer argues, "Boston lived uneasily with the fear of arson—if not the French enemy insinuating himself into the city, then its lowest-status denizens using fire to gain revenge." The threat of fire could come from foreigners or from within the community—a terrifying concept.[31]

The colonists' fear of fire continued as they contemplated how to handle arsonists in their communities. Incendiarism itself reveals much about "the intersecting concerns of law, psychology, class conflict, moral economy, and political economy," and it is important to understand not only why conflagrations were set, but also how society reacted to those fires.[32] They harshly treated those accused of setting fires, even though in many cases, no definitive proof of their involvement existed. The Court of Assistants seized Peter Lorphelin, a Frenchman, after the August 8, 1679 fire, accusing him of articulating "rash and insulting speeches in the time of the late conflagration thereby rendering himself justly suspicious of having a hand therein." Upon an examination of his property and his writings, the Court found money

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[30] Edwin Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts 1620-1692: A Documentary History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 287.
[31] Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 15-19; Peter Charles Hoffer, *Seven Fires: The Urban Infernos That Reshaped America*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006), 24.
[32] Victor H. Jew, "The 'Meanest Man in the World': Arson in the United States. A history of legal and social responses to incendiarism, 1870-1920." PhD diss., (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994), 385.

clippings, a crucible, and a melting pan. Lorphelin denied using those items to set the fire, and eventually told his captors other stories in an attempt to exonerate himself. This was to no avail, and his sentence involved time in the pillory, a substantial fine, and having both ears cut off. Later, a disgruntled slave woman in Roxbury set her master's house on fire in July 1681, and was quickly tried, convicted, and executed. Another slave set his master's house on fire in Northampton soon after, and he was executed on the same day as the Roxbury woman. In October 1682, a large fire burned through the docks, and a story circulated that the fire started by way of tools belonging to Edward Randolph. Brayley suspects that this report was a rumor started by Randolph's enemies, who knew the consequences he would face if others believed he set the fire.[33]

These accusations mirrored similar allegations made after fires in Britain—Britons seemed to accuse anyone "viewed as suspicious on account of their uncivil language and behaviour, or marginal status, such as servants, foreigners, and vagrants." Religious minorities were also favorite scapegoats. Regardless of who specifically ignited a fire, Britons quickly identified evidence of an incendiary plot. Often they categorized these as "Popish Firing Plots" and saw proof everywhere, including strange stories of numerous dead sheep with their stomachs torn open, seemingly to access the fat for incendiary devices.[34] There was also a substantial concern in both Britain and America that all of these incendiaries were connected by means of a "band of criminals." Again, there was no proof to support these suspicions, but the fear still abounded.[35]

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[33] Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 18-21; Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts*, 292.
[34] Capp, "Arson, Threats of Arson, and Incivility in Early Modern England," 208-209.
[35] Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 18-21.

Bostonians did not always blame their fires on arsonists. Colonists often looked to their religion to explain seemingly incomprehensible events such as unexplained conflagrations. Boston had seven of what were later deemed "great fires," even before the Great Fire of 1760, all of which provided colonists with examples of God's wrath.[36] Historian Peter Charles Hoffer writes that "the modern mind regards the origin and spread of fire as a natural phenomenon, even when its effects are tragic. Puritans instead located causation in the overlapping realms of divine will and individual morality. For many in Boston, the meaning of fire lay not in the accidents inherent in city life but in God's wrath on the sinner poured out in fire." The fire profoundly affected religious leaders as well. After the Fire of 1711 destroyed much of Boston, Increase Mather's previous experiences shaped his reaction. Mather "had a special antipathy to fire that combined the supernatural and the mortal worlds, for he had seen and heard the effect of the fires that the Indians set during the two horrific years of King Phillip's war…In the forty-four raids on colonial towns, Indians had destroyed over 500 houses and 100 barns with fire." He believed God sent the fire as a punishment and a warning, but Mather's past experience with fire amplified his concern when faced with a fire of that magnitude. Other colonists were familiar with the fires set by Indians, and they found those conflagrations just as impressive as Mather did. Further, the colonists' fear of fire was circular—as can be seen from Mather's experience, seeing one set of remarkable fires led one to view the next with increased trepidation. Printed accounts of fires or sermons given after conflagrations had a profound impact on audiences, and led to their increased apprehension.[37] Faced with mysterious conflagrations in their town and

[36] William Price, "A New Plan of Ye Great Town of Boston in New England in America, with the Many Additionall Buildings & New Streets, to the Year 1769." *National Humanities Center, Descriptions of Eighteenth Century Boston before the Revolution*.
[37] Hoffer, *Seven Fires*, 29.

back in London, Bostonians took steps to protect themselves from the source of their mounting fear.

EXPLAINING THE INEXPLICABLE
Fire Companies, Christianity, and Conspiracy Theories, 1730-1760

In the midst of confusion over fires' sources, Boston officials made changes to the organizations that would extinguish the blazes. Public fire companies developed in order to protect the town, and Boston was divided into sections to help companies reach the fires faster. Even with these alterations, sporadic conflagrations continued to plague Boston. But historian G.B. Warden argues that once the public controlled firemen, upon the establishment of public fire companies after the 1730s, the role of firemen in Boston society changed. Warden suspects that firemen began to play a more integral role in crowd activities, once the town bought axes and large hooks for its firefighters. Soon, reports of "axe-wielding mobs" and crowds using these items for non-fire duties became apparent. Further, many crowds engaged in activities that drew upon the talents and abilities of the firemen. Firemen were trained to tear down buildings within an extremely short period of time, in order to halt the progression of a conflagration, and on many occasions, crowds effectively and quickly razed buildings.[38]

One "suspicious" event that Warden cites occurred in 1732, when the town meeting ordered a man to remove his barn which was obstructing the path of a street. The man refused, and one night a mob appeared at the offending barn, tearing it apart in only minutes. Another example occurred when the town meeting refused to grant a petition to lay a bowling green on the location of a garrison house on Fort Hill. After the petition was refused, people observed that the house was being taken apart at night. After a period of time, a fire of unknown origin burnt down the rest of the house. Even more suspiciously, the local firemen responded slowly to the fire. The town meeting approved the petition shortly after.[39] Warden writes, "it is, of course,

[38] G.B. Warden, *Boston: 1689-1776*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 114.
[39] Ibid., 114.

impossible to prove that these events were, directly or indirectly, attributable to the firemen, but the suspicion is hard to ignore that the firemen used their special talents for various projects unrelated to the expressed intent of the Selectmen's reform."[40]

Despite the increased involvement of fire companies, colonists still saw fire as a tremendous menace. Mounting suspicions and paranoia swelled in the ensuing years. Bostonians' fear of fire peaked in 1760, with the largest conflagration the town had ever experienced. The improved fire companies could not save the town. Newspapers reported that a "most terrible fire happened in the town, supposed to be greater than any that has been known in these American colonies."[41] Jonathan Mayhew gave a sermon expressing the people's horror and massive losses, trying to explain the conflagration in religious terms. He noted specifically how "Fires have been more frequent in the town of late, than perhaps they have ever been in times past." Mayhew concluded that even though God saved Boston from destruction during these earlier fires, "it seems that God…was now determined to let loose his wrath upon us; to 'rebuke us in his anger, and chasten us in his hot displeasure'" because "God seldom, or never, brings very great and public calamities upon a community, unless it is for sins of a very heinous and provoking nature." Mayhew was ultimately convinced, like other religious leaders of the time, that the Bostonians' sinful ways brought about the Fire of 1760, and God was punishing them. Christianity provided its own explanation for events, and often factored into conspiratorial theories.[42]

But sometimes Christianity was not enough to explain the inexplicable. Colonists frequently went further, looking for overarching themes that would help them rationalize

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[40] Ibid., 114.
[41] Portsmouth, New-Hampshire, March 24th, "An account of the terrible fire which happened in Boston, Thursday, March 20th, 1760. Taken from the Boston news letter published the next day after" (1760).
[42] Jonathan Mayhew, *A Sermon Occasioned by the Great Fire in Boston, New-England, Thursday March 20, 1760, and Preached on the Lord's-Day Following*, (Boston, 1760).

sequences of events. Over time, Bostonians grew to see increasing numbers of plots in their midst—just like their British peers did after the Fire of 1666. Historian Gordon Wood asserts that "No one now can deny the prevalence of conspiratorial fears among the Revolutionaries."[43] Britons and Americans placed each other in specific contexts, seeing patterns to events, identifying plots (that may or may not have actually existed), and linking others to those plots. Also, the "political and social work still seemed small and intimate enough to hold particular men morally responsible for all that occurred within it."[44] Richard Hofstadter uses the phrase "paranoid style" to describe Americans' fear of conspiracies throughout history, and notes that "the distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy *as the motive force* in historical events."[45] The American colonists are perfect examples of people who viewed their world with a "paranoid style", particularly considering how they tried to hold others responsible for events without definitive proof. As Hofstadter writes, "the paranoid's interpretation of history is in this sense distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as a part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone's will."[46] The desire to hold others accountable for their actions, coupled with a society-wide, deep-seeded distrust of governmental rulers (particularly those working for royalty), contributed to the colonists' growing antagonism. People who were unsure of their identities or social standings were particularly prone to conspiratorial interpretations, and in many cases, exhibited symptoms of paranoia.[47]

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[43] Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 39, 3, (July 1982), 403-405.
[44] Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992), 61.
[45] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 29.
[46] Ibid., 32.
[47] Ibid., 108-109.

Bernard Bailyn argues that the colonists became increasingly concerned about the Crown's control over American colonies, and feared that Americans' lack of representation in Britain would lead to the removal of their liberties. The colonists "saw about them, with increasing clarity, not merely mistaken, or even evil, policies violating the principles upon which freedom rested, but what appeared to be evidence of nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty both in England and in America." He adds, "This belief transformed the meaning of the colonists' struggle, and it added an inner accelerator to the movement of opposition…It was this—the overwhelming evidence, as they saw it…[that] above all else that in the end propelled them into Revolution." British culture developed around conspiracies—from stories within their religious foundation to past societal unrest, conspiratorial theories and rhetoric circulated for centuries. Britons readily identified conspiracies created by royalty to deprive the citizens of their liberty. Colonists carried this language and history with them when they traveled to America, and used it to help themselves understand baffling events. Bailyn suggests that an overarching fear of conspiracy was "deeply rooted in the political awareness of eighteenth-century Britons, involved in the very structure of their political life." "Ought not the PEOPLE therefore to watch?" asked John Dickinson in 1768, "to observe facts? to search into causes? to investigate designs?" This inclination to discover conspiracies led the colonists to blame high ranking government officials, such as Hutchinson or customs collectors, for their "designs" upon the American people.[48]

Bailyn writes that fears of a British conspiracy formed in the minds of many colonists even before the passage of the Stamp Act. When Parliament did begin to pass laws that

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[48] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1967), 94-126, 145-147; Bailyn, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*, 87; John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (1768), in Paul L. Ford, ed., *The Life and Writings of John Dickinson*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Memoirs*, XIV, vol. 2, (Philadelphia: 1895), 348.

encroached on colonial rights, these laws served as additional fodder to convince other colonists that a plot did indeed exist. Bailyn thoroughly examines the growing fear of conspiracies among the colonists, and discusses how each subsequent action taken by Britain was integrated into the Americans' mounting panic. These concerns among the Americans existed more than fifty years before the Revolution occurred, and Bailyn observes that this fear reached a climax in the 1760s. Even more so, he argues that "[i]t appears…that what the American leaders were claiming in the decade before Independence had been claimed by others before them…the pattern of responses and expectations in public affairs revealed by Revolutionary leaders before Independence prove in fact to have been built into the very structure of political culture in eighteenth-century Britain and America." These ideas carried a particular weight in the colonies, and "[provide] the sufficient background for understanding why there was a Revolution." Wood agrees with Bailyn's interpretation, and by tracking the "paranoid style" of seeing patterns in events, determines that this "mode of causal attribution" is not distinctly American but certainly played a key role in influencing colonial thought leading up to the Revolution.[49]

Bailyn also analyzes the paranoia that supporters of the government exhibited. They feared falling victim to a conspiratorial plot just as deeply as their revolutionary counterparts. Loyalists and particularly members of the governmental administration worried that the colonists were constructing a plan to create their own form of government, independent of Britain. Historian David Brion Davis asserts that paranoia of this sort is frequently prompted by "highly disturbing events", and people often respond to events by believing in conspiracies. It is less frightening to believe in conspiracies than to accept that no one is in control of a situation, as modern psychiatrist Dr. Howard Feinstein observes. Furthermore, most conspiracy theories are

[49] Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 144; Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 12-13; Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 409, 429.

certainly plausible interpretations of events and information available at the time. The revolutionary American colonists, friends of the government, and Britons analyzed available information in the best way they could at the time, and given past experience, they linked seemingly unconnected facts and identified conspiracies.[50]

After examining Bailyn's argument, Davis notes that "one is struck by the far-reaching implications of the belief that the nation's liberty, its very existence, had depended on the exposure of a conspiratorial plot." He asks: "Is it possible that the circumstances of the Revolution conditioned Americans to think of resistance to a dark subversive force as the essential ingredient of their national identity?"[51] It certainly is possible, given the arguments of historians like Bailyn, Wood, and Davis. The circumstances of the Revolution may not have been the only factors in creating this fixation on conspiracies. Contemporary events, such as fires, had an impact on people's thought processes, and presented situations that could readily fit into a conspiratorial network. Given that both the Whigs and friends of government were prone to conspiratorial thought, fires presented further opportunities for those fears to develop. Building off of their common history and experiences with such conflagrations as the Great Fire of London in 1666, friends of the government and revolutionaries recognized plots against them in the path of destruction left by fires. Furthermore, revolutionary colonists recognized a societal fear of fire, again building off of a common British history of marking celebration and protests with bonfires, and used that fear to their advantage. Not only were people afraid—to the point of paranoia—of fire, but the Whigs recognized this and sometimes stokes this fear deliberately.

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[50] Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 150-159; David Brion Davis, "Conspiracy in the American Revolution (1763-1783)," *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion From the Revolution to the Present*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), xiv.

[51] Davis, "Conspiracy in the American Revolution (1763-1783)," 23; Howard M. Feinstein, "April 1969: A Celebration of the Mass," in *Divided We Stand: Reflections on the Crisis at Cornell*, Cushing Strout and David I. Grossvogel, ed., (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1970), 110.

Given the reactions of various friends of the government when faced with crowd action, these people were not only fearful of the developing crowds, but were also alarmed by the crowds' usage of fire. On the eve of 1761, an extensive history with fire and paranoia had laid the foundation for Bostonians' reactions to injuries inflicted by the British government. This environment provided a backdrop for colonial protests.

THE STAMP ACT RIOTS
Incendiary Protests, 1760-1770

Bonfires found a particular place in colonial crowd actions during the 1760s. Events such as the Stamp Act riots and the Boston Massacre laid the foundation for later revolutionary activities and contributed to a climate of mounting fear. In July 1765, Andrew Oliver had built a house on his wharf, and colonists suspected that he intended to use it as a Stamp Office. On August 5, the Boston Anti-Stamp Fire Society "came to a *generous* Resolution, that if the Stamp Office should be on Fire, (and no other Buildings be in Danger) they would not assist in extinguishing it; being sensible that they should shew as little Humanity, in exerting themselves to suppress a Fire so *friendly* to the Community, as they should in being inactive Spectators of the Conflagration of the whole Town."[52] The house was already marked for destruction, and in fact, a crowd came and destroyed the building and Oliver's home only eight days later. It is unclear if the Fire Society knew that a crowd would destroy these structures, but their resolution discussing the house's demolition by fire is suspicious. Additionally, the public notice of inaction transformed the Society into a political organization able to rally other Whigs.

One month after Oliver's property burned, Governor Francis Bernard looked out from Castle William in the Boston Harbor towards the town. Suddenly, a light caught his eye and he grew gravely concerned: "I saw a bonfire burning on Fort Hill; by which I understand that the mob is up and probably doing mischief."[53] Although the crowd had constructed the bonfire as a celebration of Oliver's resignation as stamp distributor, Bernard did not know this. Instead, he

[52] *Boston Gazette*, August 11, 1765.
[53] Francis Bernard to Lord Halifax, August 15, 1765, *Bernard Papers*, III, Houghton Library, Harvard University, 141.

assumed the worst and recognized the large, controlled fire as a beckoning signal for a crowd.[54] The governor wrote to General Thomas Gage later that month, announcing that "the Town of Boston is in the Possession of an incensed & implacable Mob; I have no force to oppose them."[55] He had reason to be apprehensive—in the previous two weeks, Bernard watched as violent crowds destroyed his colleagues' houses in protest of the Stamp Act, and worried that his residence was next. Bernard's suspicions were correct; more incendiary crowd action followed, but the group did not target any of his property.

At twilight on August 26, a group of "Boys and Children" started a bonfire on King Street. Bernard watched as this group surrounded the fire, yelling for "Liberty and Property" which he noted was "the usual Notice of their Intention to plunder & pull down an House."[56] Thomas Hutchinson was also monitoring the crowd, and saw that the fire specifically called the crowd together, just as Bernard observed earlier that month: "the leaders of the mob contrived a riot, which, after some small efforts against such officers, was to spend its principle force upon the lieutenant-governor. And, in the evening of the twenty-sixth of August, such a mob was collected in King street, drawn there by a bonfire, and well supplied with strong drink."[57] Once night fell completely, the fire dwindled, and a "great Number of disguised Ruffians…armed with Clubs, Staves" drew together "instantaneously." The *Boston Gazette* also reported that the initial fire "serv'd further to increase their Numbers, till they soon made a very formidable Appearance."[58]

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[54] Andrew Stephen Walmsley, *Thomas Hutchinson and the American Revolution*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 66.
[55] Governor Bernard to Major General Gage, Castle William, August 27, 1765, Edward Channing and Archibald Cary Coolidge, ed. *The Barrington-Bernard Correspondence and Illustrative Matter 1760-1770, Drawn From the "Papers of Sir Francis Bernard (Sometime Governor of Massachusetts-Bay)*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), 227.
[56] Bernard to the Earl of Halifax, August 31, 1765, *Bernard Papers*, IV.
[57] Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 3: 90.
[58] *Boston Gazette*, September 2, 1765.

A local fireward attempted to "extinguish or at least to diminish" the fire but he was told not to interfere by "several Whispers from a Person unknown, warning him of danger." A group assaulted the fireward, and he subsequently left. The crowd then proceeded to attack several buildings, including the house of William Story, the deputy registrar of the Court of Vice Admiralty. The dying King Street bonfire was rekindled with his private papers.[59] The bonfire in fact had signaled the group to assemble, and then became a means to further destroy Story's property. Next, the crowd arrived at Lieutenant-Governor Thomas Hutchinson's house, and destroyed it. Hutchinson knew that Ebenezer Mackintosh, a former engineman, led this crowd, and suspected that he had been commissioned by others.[60] The events of that night were clearly preplanned, at least by the crowd's organizers. Ebenezer Parkman, the minister of Westborough (which is thirty-five miles from Boston) received a letter on the twenty-sixth from a friend in Boston detailing future crowd actions. The letter, dated August 24, indicated that Bernard, Hutchinson, and Story would fall victim. While Parkman was not entirely correct (Benjamin Hallowell, the Comptroller of Customs, was attacked instead of Bernard), he knew this information before the events took place—the protests were planned in advance.[61]

Historian Dirk Hoerder specifically notes this crowd's workings with local leadership, arguing that "without support from powerful individuals, they could not have lighted the bonfire in King Street or defied the firewarden's orders to extinguish it."[62] If Hoerder's assertion is correct, either the group that set the bonfire did so at the orders of "powerful individuals," or the local leaders had capitalized on the mechanism (setting bonfires) already put in place by the crowd. In either scenario, the fire served as a symbol for the crowd, and all of Boston began to

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[59] *Boston Post-Boy*, September 2, 1765.
[60] Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 3: 101.
[61] Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, August 26, 1765, Photostat of the Massachusetts Historical Society.
[62] Dirk Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts 1765-1780*, (New York; Academic Press, Inc., 1977), 107.

recognize the link between the two. Peter Oliver, the brother of Andrew Oliver, noticed the correlation, and observed that "according to a common Custom, when a Riot was to be brought on, the Factioneers would employ Boys & Negroes to assemble & make Bonfires in the Streets; & when all were ready, the Mob Whistle…with sometimes the Mob Horn in Unison, would echo through the Streets, to the great Terror of the peaceable Inhabitants." Interestingly, John Adams in his closing arguments of the Boston Massacre trials also blamed the Massacre on a similar group of "Boys & Negroes." Oliver further described the building of a bonfire in order to assemble the crowd on March 5, 1770, right before the Boston Massacre.[63]

Further, the lieutenant-colonel of a militia group witnessed the crowd that attacked Hutchinson's house. He was too afraid to try to stop the destruction of the house, but observed that the group was directed by two individuals, both carrying long staves.[64] Firewards often used staves like these to draw attention to themselves as leaders at a scene and to direct the group helping extinguish the fire.[65] The staves served as a "distinguishing badge," and those carrying them possessed "superintending services at a conflagration, where they seem to have had the direction of all work."[66] Given that Ebenezer Mackintosh had helped lead the crowd that attacked Hutchinson's house, these staves may have been fire staves. Mackintosh was not a fireward, but he still may have had access to a fire staff for this use.

The Boston town meetings, perhaps disingenuously, took care to publicly discourage mobs and riots. In 1767, as in other years, inhabitants were instructed not to let their servants light bonfires in the streets, with the promise that all who did enkindle bonfires would be

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[63] Adair, *Peter Oliver's Origins & Progress of the American Revolution*, 89.
[64] Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 3: 90, Note.
[65] Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 32 (quotation).
[66] William V. Wells, *The Life and Public Services of Samuel Adams Being a Narrative of His Acts and Opinions, and of his Agency in Producing and Forwarding the American Revolution*, vol. 2, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), 141.

prosecuted. Not only did bonfires pose physical threats to the town, but others could interpret them as a means of gathering a crowd. Peter Oliver feared slaves setting bonfires. Later that year, upon the release of "sundry scandalous and threatning Papers…posted in various parts of the Town, by some evil minded Person or Persons…tending to excite Tumults & Disorders," the meeting voted that "the Inhabitants of this Town will be ready on all occasions to assist the selectmen and Majestrates in the suppression of all Disorders that may arise." The inhabitants, at least in the meeting minutes, were divorced from the crowds and ordered to help stop such crowd actions. One year earlier, the meeting sent a letter, written by James Otis, to Dennis DeBerdt which articulated how "This Town has always been very careful during the late times of calamity to preserve as much as possible good order among its inhabitants, of which they gave an early proof when a dangerous mob arose and some outrages were committed by persons as yet unknown." Otis went on to describe the mob as being "sudden and unexpected and appear'd so furious as to occasion a general consternation." The meeting, frustrated that the British thought the entire town was involved in this activity, spoke of those who "express'd their detestation of such proceedings early the next day." Otis went further, writing that "there is a set of men in America who are continually transmitting to the mother country odious and false accounts of the collonys; which is a crime of the most dangerous tendency."[67] He worried about a conspiracy designed to harm the colonies, and wanted to disassociate the town meeting with crowd actions—in spite of what anti-colonial conspirators might say.

This measure may have been taken to prevent conflagrations and the gathering of crowds from endangering the town, but those friendly to the British government did not believe the meeting's purported motivations. Hutchinson was in disbelief every time the town meetings discussed mobs, particularly when the meetings criticized crowd action "by persons unknown".

[67] *Records Relating to the Early History of Boston.* (Boston, 1886), 192-194, 205.

He angrily retorted: "Persons unknown! Mackintosh who is now a town officer and no doubt with other leaders of the mob was at the town meeting expressed their abhorrence the next day of what they themselves had done the night before." He believed that "it could not be doubted, that many of those who were immediate actors in, as well as of those who had been abettors of, those violent proceedings, were present at this unanimous vote."[68] Furthermore, during the celebratory anniversary of the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1769, the meeting discussed Governor Bernard's apprehension of crowd action and how town leaders thought he exaggerated past riots. Contrary to Bernard's concerns, the town's selectmen asserted that "none of them were apprehensive that *their* festivity would produce a riot; but they were careful to prevent the lighting a Bonfire, because the Governor had constantly represented that as 'the signal for a Mob;' and the Joys of the Evening among the lower sort which however innocent are sometimes noisy, would of course be represented as riotous."[69]

This description is part of a "Report of the Committee appointed to vindicate the Town of Boston from the many false and malicious Aspersions contained in certain Letters and Memorials", written in reaction to "inflammatory representations" of the town's actions on the part of Governor Bernard, General Thomas Gage, and others. The authors of this document clearly believed that these officials deliberately misrepresented Boston to the Crown, and played roles in a vast British conspiracy against the colonists. They warned these leaders that "no Man has reason to fear the popular fury, but he who is conscious to himself of having done that which has exposed him to their Just resentment." The authors justified the crowd's actions, but "popular fury" is as a possible threat. The Report criticized the governor's reactions to Boston crowds, and the authors argued that their "legal Meetings" and "free Assemblys" did not "irritate the people

[68] Walmsley, *Thomas Hutchinson and the Origins of the American Revolution*, 71; Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 3: 91.
[69] *Records Relating to the Early History of Boston.* (Boston, 1886), 205, 307.

and inflame their minds." They asserted that "these 'wild and violent proposals,' which no one can recollect but the Governor, and perhaps his Informers," drastically differed from the reality of the situation, in which the people merely exercised their "noble freedom of speech." The authors acquired these accounts of crowds from the private letters of Governor Bernard, General Gage, and Commodore Samuel Hood, and their use in the Report illustrates how the revolutionaries perceived government supporters. As British officials anxiously observed that bonfires tended to lead to mobs, Boston leaders began to notice their nervousness.[70]

British fears of crowd action organized by local leaders came to fruition. The Loyal Nine wanted to find someone to manage the crowds they hoped to create, a public figurehead for the resistance in Boston. They chose Ebenezer Mackintosh. Engine Master Stephen Greenleaf picked Mackintosh in 1759 to be a fire sergeant for engine number nine, one of the newly developed fire units in Boston, based on his military service. Revolutionary leaders first saw Mackintosh's performance directing his fellow enginemen and helping battle the Fire of 1760, and they were impressed. They also found impressive Mackintosh's role as the leader of the South End throng during the Pope's Day celebration of 1764, when he led the South End to its first victory over the North End. Later, the previously antagonistic North End and South End crowds joined forces to oppose the Stamp Act and convince Andrew Oliver to resign his post. The combined groups strove to illustrate what sort of organized resistance Boston could muster. At this point, Mackintosh claimed to have over one hundred and fifty men under his command, and was gradually becoming someone who crowds would follow.[71]

Peter Oliver seemed to respect and, to some extent, admire Mackintosh. He described the leader as "the antitype of *Massianello* of *Naples*; but he was a much cleverer Fellow. He was

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[70] Ibid., 303, 307, 309, 314.
[71] George P. Anderson, "Ebenezer Mackintosh: Stamp Act Rioter and Patriot," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Transactions 1924-1926*, vol. XXVI, (Boston, 1927), 25-26, 43.

sensible & manly, & performed their [the Leaders of the Faction] dirty Jobs for them with great Eclat. He dressed genteelly; & in Order to convince the publick of that Power with which he invested." Mackintosh particularly impressed Oliver when on November 5, 1765, "[Mackintosh] paraded the Town with a Mob of 2000 Men in two Files, & passed by the Stadthouse, when the general Assembly were sitting, to display his Power. If a Whisper was heard among his followers, the holding up his Finger hushed it in a Moment: & when he had fully displayed his Authority, he marched his Men to the first Rendevouz, & order'd them to retire peacably to their several Homes; & was punctually obeyed."[72] The parade Oliver mentions demonstrated that the North End and South End gangs could work in tandem, and that the "uncontrollable" mob could in fact be managed. Colonel William Brattle of the Massachusetts militia also took note of Mackintosh's command, praising his military-like control over the group and telling him that "his Post was one of the highest in the Government."[73]

Loyal Nine member Henry Bass wrote to Samuel Savage in December 1765, and told him that the Loyal Nine had met to discuss ways to encourage Andrew Oliver's resignation from office. They decided to print a public letter that asked people to gather and demand Oliver resign, feeling that this means of communication would be "most Satisfactory to the Public." Bass also wrote that "the whole affair transacted by the Loyall Nine, in writing the Letter, getting the advertisements Printed [and]…the Advertisements Pasted up." Bass went even further to discuss the organization's control over the mob. He wrote, "[w]e do everything in order to keep this and the first Affair Private: and are not a little pleas'd to hear that McIntosh has the Credit of the whole Affair." The first affair is most likely the burning of Oliver's effigy a few days earlier.[74]

[72] Adair, *Peter Oliver's Origins & Progress of the American Revolution*, 54-55.
[73] Bernard to Pownall, November 6, 1765, *Bernard Papers,* IV.
[74] Henry Bass to Samuel P. Savage, Boston, December 19, 1765. *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, 1910-1911*, vol. XLIV, (Boston: 1911), 688-689.

The Loyal Nine and Sons of Liberty prompted crowd action by inundating colonists with posters and newspaper notices in latter protests as well. Thus, the Loyal Nine deliberately controlled the crowd's activities and were thrilled that others believed Mackintosh was the organizer of the crowd action.[75]

In addition to leading multitudes, Mackintosh played a valuable role furthering the connections between fire and crowds. One incident, which occurred in February of 1766, exemplifies how Mackintosh, and perhaps the revolutionary leaders who encouraged him, used fire as a metaphor. Groups in several colonies decided to publicly burn Stamp Act papers on February 20. Crowds burnt such papers in Boston, and groups set bonfires in protest of the Act in other Massachusetts towns, including Salem and Marblehead. On the twenty-fourth, a group by the name of "the True-Born Sons of Liberty" wrote the following letter, which was published on the twenty-seventh in the *Boston News-Letter*: "THE Sons of Liberty being informed that a Vessel has arrived here with stamped Clearances, from Jamaica, desire that you would go and demand in their Names those Marks of Creole Slavery; and when you have obtained them, commit to the Flames in King-Street, This Day at One o'clock; and for so doing this shall be your Warrant. Signed, by Order of the True born SONS of LIBERTY. M.Y. Sec." While this group appeared to operate under a different name, the signature at the bottom of the letter is that which appeared on various Sons of Liberty correspondence, implying that this letter was written by the Sons of Liberty themselves. Approximately 2000-3000 people attended the mock trial and execution, held on a stage under the Liberty Tree.[76]

The article continued by explaining what the owner of this letter did when he received it. The "Person to whom the above was directed", along with others, retrieved the documents from

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[75] George P. Anderson, "A Note on Ebenezer Mackintosh," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Transactions, 1924-1926*, vol. XXVI, (Boston, 1927), 354-255.
[76] *Boston News-Letter*, February 27, 1766; Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 130.

the ship's captain. "they then fixed it on a Pole, and carried it to the lower End of the Court-House, where they put the Pole in the Stocks, and exposed the Paper to publick View until the Time appointed for Execution: At One o'clock the Warrant was read with an audible Voice, the Executioner then carried the guilty Criminal to the Centre of King-Street, and with a lighted Match set Fire to one of the [Stamp Acts], and with that burnt the Offspring of that Hydra-headed Monster; while the Smoak was ascending the Executioner pronounced the following Words, viz. – 'Behold! the Smoak ascends to Heaven, to witness between the Isle of Britain and an injured people!' – Three Cheers were then given and the 'Change cleared in a few Minutes, without the least Disorder."[77] Leaders carried out the ceremony to "execute" the Act for the benefit of those who witnessed it, mimicking a government procedure to legitimize the action of destroying the Stamp Act.

The executioner used language referencing the popular image of fire as purifying—the fire and smoke removed the offending Act from earth and carried the people's grievances to God. Patriotic religious leaders also allegedly used such language, and they, according to Peter Oliver, wanted Tories to leave earth and burn in hell. This usage built on fire symbolism which had been in place for hundreds of years. Most notably, members of the Mackintosh family and historian George Anderson suppose that the recipient of the quoted letter and the man who retrieved the papers from the ship was Mackintosh himself.[78] He may or may not have performed the role of executioner, but he may have helped control the flames and disperse onlookers once the festivities ended. Mackintosh's ability to control crowds certainly mirrors the ability of the letter's recipient, so his involvement is certainly plausible.

[77] *Boston News-Letter*, February 27, 1766.
[78] Anderson, "Ebenezer Mackintosh: Stamp Act Rioter and Patriot," 48-50.

Crowds continued to foster their relationship with fire. Candles could perform the same functions as bonfires in uniting a group, and as such, fire extended into a symbol of compliance and agreement with a crowd action, and helped draw attention to crowd activities. One evening in 1769, a crowd of angry Bostonians discovered an informer who told Customs Officers about smuggled goods and the informer was tarred, feathered, and paraded down King Street. The crowd forced him to carry a "lanthorn" to make him more visible to bystanders. Newspapers reported that "Numbers of People perhaps some Thousands were gathered together" to watch the scene, and noticing this, the crowd "ordered the Inhabitants to put Lights in their Windows, as they pass'd, which in general was comply'd with." The lights, presumably candles or lanterns, signaled that inhabitants not directly involved in the crowd supported this punishment, recognized its legitimacy, and established a claim in the action.[79]

The very day reports of this incident appeared in the *Boston Post-Boy*, so too did an excerpt from the Province Law, published by request of British government officials. The excerpt defined a dangerous gathering as any group of more than three people, disguised or carrying "Sticks, Clubs, or any Kind of Weapons." Such a gathering was particularly problematic if it assembled "together having any Imagery or Pageantry with them as a public Shew, in any of the Streets or Lanes of the Town of Boston." Government supporters feared crowds especially when they relied on symbolism and attracted others' attention. Individuals engaging in this sort of activity, principally during the time "between Sun-setting and Sun rising," risked fines and imprisonment. Government officials and their supporters accurately identified such public uses of fire and symbolism as a way to organize resistance, and grew increasingly alarmed.[80]

[79] *Boston Post-Boy*, October 30, 1769.
[80] Ibid.

The British also concerned themselves with those they saw as the organizers of these crowd actions. They worried about Mackintosh's continued role in incendiary crowd activities, and did not know how to stop the gatherings without further angering inhabitants and bringing Hutchinson's fears to fruition. In April of 1774, a London newspaper articulated these concerns, writing that "it may be depended upon that a sloop of war sailed from Plymouth 14 days since for Boston, with orders to bring to England, in irons, Messrs. Hancock, Row, Adams, and Mc'Intosh. Mc'Intosh has been very active among the lower order of people, and the others among the higher. Should government kidnap and bring over as prisoners the leading patriots at Boston, it is much to be feared it will cause an insurrection." The *Boston Evening-Post* printed this report in May 1774, having taken it from the British newspaper. Despite the fact that this rumor was incorrect, it is significant that it originated in Britain and that the British newspaper identified these four people (with Hancock and Adams being current firewards, and Rowe formerly serving from 1759 to 1772) as the most influential leaders of the rebellion. These four allegedly influenced all strata of society, and Britons feared that their capture would surely trigger another crowd action.

Following the Stamp Act riots, though, Mackintosh disappeared from public view, only alluding to his participation in the Boston Tea Party much later. While his involvement in this event is suspect, in 1810 he announced to a young man in New Hampshire that "it was my chickens that did the job." This comment may mean that he helped organize the event or merely that participants were some of the same people who were involved in his riots. Some people, in fact, believe that revolutionary leaders asked Mackintosh to leave Boston, worrying that he knew too much about the origins of the Tea Party and would "talk too much."[81] Regardless of the reason, Mackintosh did leave Boston, but only after helping establish a trend of crowd activity

[81] Anderson, "Ebenezer Mackintosh: Stamp Act Rioter and Patriot," 52-56; *Boston Evening-Post*, May 16, 1774.

that left the British and Tories more than a little worried for their safety. Fires had been literally and symbolically linked to crowds, and Whigs continued to explore this connect in subsequent years.

THE BOSTON MASSACRE
Gathering a Crowd, 1770

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of both parties' fear of conspiracies was the Boston Massacre. The night of March 5, 1770, marks one of the most violent crowd actions prior to the Revolution itself, and exhibits a prominent link between crowd action and the prevailing ideas about fire. After colonial boys confronted British soldiers on King Street in the early evening, someone rang the town's fire bell. Shortly after, the crowd began to grow. Although bell ringing was used to convey a variety of meanings during the day, when the bells rang at night, the only conclusion was that there was a fire, and someone needed help.[82] There has been some argument among scholars whether or not those in Boston generally believed the bells indicated a real fire, and in either case, why someone would ring the bell at that specific moment. The slant of the scholarship seems to affect how the origins of the Massacre are treated; most notably, those focusing on and sympathizing with the revolutionaries predominately argue that people congregated in King Street to extinguish a fire.[83] But evidence exists that suggests otherwise—that the bell was rung deliberately, with knowledge that there was no fire, and the bell signaled the start of a Whig plot against the British troops.

Based on accounts from colonists testifying in the prosecutions against the soldiers, the events leading up to the Massacre are also noteworthy; the development of the King Street crowd helps explain colonists' motivations that evening. The testimony from the trials of Captain Preston and the soldiers carries particular weight, given the possible motivation of revolutionaries testifying to make the soldiers sound as aggressive as possible, especially as

[82] Hiller B. Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, (New York; W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), 190.
[83] For instance, G.B. Warden's *Boston: 1689-1776* claims that all who came into the streets that night did so "to find out where the fire was" (234). Andrew Stephen Walmsley acknowledges the use of crowd action, but asserts that the crowd gathered "ostensibly responding to the fire alarm," (Walmsley, *Thomas Hutchinson and the Origins of the American Revolution*, 117).

compared to the "peaceful" colonists. Many of those called to testify did just that, and deemphasized the crowd-gathering that preceded the shooting; however, several colonists readily admitted to joining a developing crowd and carrying weapons. Further, these men were all under oath, and bound to tell the truth. Much of this testimony corresponds with other first-hand observations by government supporters and British soldiers, further validating the presence of a preconceived plot.

Whether people believed the bells signaled an actual fire or prompted crowd action is significant. Many Britons and British supporters believed that the revolutionaries used the fire bell to trigger a mob; this belief indicates a fear that the colonists used fire bells to their advantage. In the late 1760s, military officers, fearful of crowd gatherings, were instructed to "put troops on alert each time the fire bells were rung," so this connection between crowds and fire bells was not unique to the Boston Massacre—troops knew that bell-ringing could signify trouble for them.[84] Those providing accounts of colonists arriving at King Street carrying weapons and not fire equipment presumably worried about subsequent ringing of the fire bell and cries of "fire". When they saw that there was no fire, their next thought was of crowd action.

Additionally, many accounts of the Massacre (particularly accounts by government supporters) do not mention the fear of a fire or the use of the fire bell that evening. Perhaps the bell's usage was so integral to many people's behavior that evening that its sounding remained at the forefront of many people's memories. People who recognized the bell as a signal to gather in King Street remembered its ring. Those who did not listen for it, such as Peter Oliver, noted only what they observed in the past and what scared them the most—bonfires and a mob of several hundred colonists. These people were terrified by any large, seemingly uncontrolled, gathering, particularly when the crowd members carried weapons. They also had watched crowds assemble

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[84] Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 192.

during the 1760s, and were intimately familiar with the ramifications of those assemblies. Public exhibitions of discontent were particularly alarming, and interestingly, many public processions and crowd actions occurred on King Street in the years before 1770. The location may indicate the Massacre's planning, and King Street was certainly a familiar site for crowd action.

One of the aspects of New England society that Peter Oliver (writing in 1781) found most contemptible was clergy members' participation in rebellions. Some preached that it was not a crime to kill Tories, while others prayed that the Lord "Bind up all the Tories on this and the other Side of the Water, into one Bundle, & cast them into the bottomless Pit, & let the Smoke of their Torment ascend forever & ever." Just as Mayhew and Mather preached that God used conflagrations to punish Bostonians, if Oliver's accounts are correct, religious figures predicted the suffering of government supporters in the fires of hell. Oliver felt that such prayers were unchristian, and that "the Clergy had quite unlearned the Gospel, & substituted Politicks in its Stead" since they were "seduced by the Madness of the Times." But not only were the clergy "making a League with the Devil, and a Covenant with Hell," in his mind they actively engaged in a conspiracy against the government with other colonists. He even mentions a sexton who "sometimes would ring the Bell to raise the Mob."

Here is another instance of the bell's usage in mob activities. The town's bell rang to alert people to fires, and also to recognize religious occasions. All bell-ringing occasions were predetermined except to announce incendiary emergencies, so when a bell rang at an unanticipated moment, people's thoughts turned to fire, and later, to mobs assembling through a charade.[85] Oliver uses this reference in his book's section about the Boston Tea Party,

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[85] Bells were rung in America and in England to communicate with the public. Reasons for bell ringing included (among others) ringing in the New Year or Christmas, summoning worshippers, signaling weddings and funerals, marking rites of passage, coronation days for royalty, changes in political leadership, and patriotic anniversaries, and to signify celebrations as delineated by ruling leaders. People believed the bells could "speak", and their presence

insinuating that the bell was used to assemble mobs after 1770, so that its use in the Massacre was not an isolated incident. Interestingly, two weeks before the Massacre, government supporter Ebenezer Richardson tried to destroy an effigy and soon found his house surrounded by a crowd of patriots. Richardson, in a panic, fired several shots out his window, killing a boy named Christopher Sneider. When the group saw what had occurred, "got into the new brick meeting house and rang the bell, on which they had soon company enough to beset the house front and rear."[86] Ringing the fire bell was a preset means of communication among the colonists and they previously had used the bell to gather a larger crowd.[87] Even if some of the crowd actually believed that a fire existed on March 5, there was no real fire that evening; whoever rang the bell deliberately used it as a means of drawing a crowd.

The Sons of Liberty and the Loyal Nine were well aware that the town's bell could draw people together. They posted a flyer in November 1773 attempting to engage their fellow colonists and gather an angry group at Faneuil Hall to plan a protest of the Tea Act. The poster asked that people gather at nine o'clock, "at which time the Bells will begin to Ring." Approximately one thousand people came.[88] Clearly, the bells were useful in gathering both peaceful groups to pass a town resolution (as this crowd did) and mobs willing to destroy property. The people also recognized their usage; it took only a few hours to gather a large crowd. The papers were posted only that morning, and unless there was prior notification, the

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was deeply integral to parish life in Britain. The tradition of bell ringing carried into the American colonies, which used bells for similar purposes. In particular, bells served as announcements. Their use was sometimes connected to the presence of bonfires, and the combination also served as a means of announcement. Additionally, who rang the bells was just as important as the announcement, as was the "timing, duration, volume, intensity, and panache" of the bells. Bells were the perfect medium for such communication, since no one could escape their messages; bells could be heard over urban clamor and for vast distances. For more information on the various uses of bells in Britain, see David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells*.

[86] *Newport Mercury*, March 5, 1770.

[87] Adair, *Peter Oliver's Origins & Progress of the American Revolution*, 104-105.

[88] John Rowe, *Letters and Diary of John Rowe: Boston Merchant, 1759-1762, 1764-1779*, Anne Rowe Cunningham and Edward Lillie Pierce, ed., (Boston: W.B. Clarke Company, 1903), 255-256.

people congregated within a limited time frame. And on March 5, 1770, leaders also relied on bells to gather a crowd to oppose British soldiers. As demonstrated by first-hand accounts of the events immediately preceding the soldiers' gunfire, colonists recognized the bells' peal as a signal.

Thomas Hutchinson observed that at "about eight o'clock, one of the bells of the town was rung in such a manner as is usual in the case of fire. This called people into the streets. A large number assembled in the market-place, not far from King street, armed with bludgeons, or clubs."[89] According to Hutchinson's account, people were drawn into the streets under the pretense of a fire, but they arrived armed; no one would arrive at the scene of a conflagration with bludgeons and other weapons instead of water buckets and other useful tools, so it appears that these colonists were prepared to fight an enemy other than fire. Hutchinson expressed this concern in his history of the colony, published years later and designed to be honest but also perhaps to glorify his role in the colony's development. His account should therefore not be accepted simply on its own merit. Captain Thomas Preston himself claimed to be initially convinced of the presence of a fire, but quickly realized that, in the absence of fire, the bells were signaling a mob to assemble: "On Monday night about 8 o'clock two soldiers were attacked and beat. But the party of the townspeople in order to carry matters to the utmost length, broke into two meeting houses and rang the alarm bells, which I supposed was for fire as usual, but was soon undeceived. About 9 some of the guard came to and informed me the town inhabitants were assembling to attack the troops, and that the bells were ringing as the signal for that purpose and not for fire, and the beacon intended to be fired to bring in the distant people of the country. This,

[89] Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 3: 195.

as I was captain of the day, occasioned my repairing immediately to the main guard."[90] Preston too had an ulterior motive in writing this account—trying to exonerate himself and his men from any wrongdoing. But both his observations and Hutchinson's can be corroborated by members of the crowd.

Other accounts substantiate this information, illuminating a network of communication that existed among the colonists. Large groups of people in different areas of the city heard about the alleged fire, knew it was not a real fire, and proceeded to King Street fully armed and ready for violence. A cluster of people in the South End were told by someone in their group "not to be uneasy, for he had heard [the bell] was only to gather people to fight the soldiers."[91] This man, oddly enough, knew well beforehand that the fire bell was going to be used to gather a mob. Another man heard the bells and ran into the streets, where he was told "it was not fire, but the soldiers fighting with the inhabitants." He then "went into the house and could find no stick, but I cut the handle off my mother's broom off; with this I came to King street."[92] Joseph Hiller, upon hearing the bells, walked to the center of town where he was told "there was no fire, but a rumpus betwixt the soldiers and the inhabitants." He walked on, with the bells still ringing behind him.[93] Those in the Green Dragon tavern also heard that the noise outside was not due to a fire, but "a rumpus with the soldiers."[94]

Thomas Marshall, a Son of Liberty and the only elected fireward to testify in the soldiers' trials, tried to prevent the fire from spreading and reinstate order, but thought better of it. He later

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[90] "Captain Thomas Preston's Account of the Boston Massacre" (13 March 1770) from British Public Records Office, C.O. 5/759. Reprinted in Merrill Jensen ed., English Historical Documents, vol. IX (London, 1964), 750-753.
[91] As quoted in Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 226.
[92] Frederic Kidder and John Adams, ed., *History of the Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770; Consisting of the Narrative of the Town, the Trial of the Soldiers: and a Historical Introduction, Containing Unpublished Documents of John Adams and Explanatory Notes by Frederic Kidder*, (Albany, New York: Joel Munsell, 1870), 208.
[93] Ibid., 149.
[94] Ibid., 190.

testified that “the bells were then ringing, and I thought it was fire. I had a mind to get my staff and go out, but I had a reluctance, because I had been warned not to go out that night.”[95] The firewards seem to have been notified ahead of time that a “rumpus” would be staged—just like they were during the Stamp Act riots years earlier. John Rowe (another fireward) wrote in his diary, “The Bells Rung A Great Number Assembled in King Street.”[96] He does not appear to have thought the bells indicated a fire, and seems to have connected the crowd’s assembly directly to the bells. Russell Bourne argues that the cries of “fire” were previously rehearsed, and that the Massacre was “scarcely spontaneous.” His book’s emphasis is the colonists at the waterfront, so he particularly looks towards men working on the docks on March 5. Many seamen had been granted leave that evening, so they were free to join the crowd in King Street. He also notes that soldiers in the 14th and 29th regiments seemed to know about an impending mob, posting a notice that they were prepared to defend themselves if need be.[97]

Benjamin Burdick testified that he went to King Street, immediately approached the soldiers, and began shouting at them, asking if they were going to fire. He remembered that one of the soldiers pushed Burdick with his bayonet, “which I put by with what was in my hand.” Question: “What was it?” Answer: “A Highland broad sword.” Question: “What occasion had you to carry it?” Answer: “A young man that boarded with me, and was at the ropewalks, told me several of them [the soldiers] had spite at him…When alarmed by the cry of fire, and I had got below the house, my wife called after me, and said it is not fire, it is an affray in King street, if you are going take this.”[98] He did not want to freely offer the information that he was carrying

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[95] “An Alphabetical List of the Sons of Liberty who din'd at Liberty Tree, Dorchester, 14 August 1769.” *Massachusetts Historical Society*; Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 157.
[96] Rowe, *Letters and Diary of John Rowe*, 197.
[97] Russell Bourne. *Cradle of Violence: How Boston’s Waterfront Mobs Ignited the American Revolution*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006), 156-157.
[98] Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 152.

a drawn sword, and it only came to light during his cross examination. Also, Burdick was more than willing to confront a soldier even without fully understanding the situation, as demonstrated only months earlier, when he confronted and thrashed a soldier found patrolling near a neighbor's house.[99]

During the majority of the testimony, neither the witnesses nor the attorneys discussed the "radical plot" that instigated the Massacre. Only one witness, John Gillespie, reported seeing "not less than fifty people, with white sticks in their hands…"[100] This gang of locals gathered, already armed, at seven o'clock—nearly two hours before the shots were fired, and some period of time before the fire bell rang. Historian Hiller Zobel argues that no other witness testified about the great gathering of people because "John Adams, vigorously overruling Josiah Quincy [who wanted to introduce proof of the plot as evidence], refused to permit it." Adams instructed Quincy not to use any further evidence that would "show that the expulsion of the troops from the town of Boston was a plan concerted among the inhabitants." Adams seemed to want to blame slaves, sailors, and Irish immigrants, all outsiders, in order to exonerate his clients without impugning the town's patriots.[101]

John Weir, surgeon's mate serving in the 14th Regiment, testified that following a brawl in King Street, he saw "a number of men running towards King-street, and immediately a few returned, crying 'Ring the alarm bell,' and went into a meeting house opposite the window where I was, and rang the bell as if for fire." Weir left the window, and only fifteen minutes later "heard the report of five or six muskets."[102] Weir's account provides a timeframe for when the bell was rung, and how soon it took the mass to assemble. If the crowd spent some of those fifteen

[99] Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, 183.
[100] Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 189.
[101] Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, 259, and quotation.
[102] Francis Maseres, *A Fair Account of the Late Unhappy Disturbance at Boston*, (London, 1770), 11.

minutes throwing things and shouting at the soldiers, then those that arrived at King Street following the bell had only a few minutes to arm themselves and get there. Since many people came bearing weapons instead of being prepared to fight a fire, they must have known beforehand that this would occur. Some colonists could certainly have walked shorter distances and therefore had plenty of time to realize there was no fire, return to their residences, and grab weapons, but this scenario is unlikely when applied to the crowd as a whole. Especially when coupled with evidence that the confrontation was preplanned, it seems that it (generally) only took inhabitants fifteen minutes to travel to King Street, ready for battle.

Preston was convinced that the people of Boston were out to destroy him and his soldiers based on what he saw during the event and during the trials: "So bitter and inveterate are many of the malcontents here that they are industriously using every method to fish out evidence to prove it was a concerted scheme to murder the inhabitants. Others are infusing the utmost malice and revenge into the minds of the people who are to be my jurors by false publications, votes of towns, and all other artifices." Preston worried about a conspiracy among the colonists, and during the trials, desperately tried to ascribe an organization to facts and scenarios he could not comprehend. Hutchinson believed that prospective jurors were being prejudiced against the soldiers, due to recent circulations of documents such as Paul Revere's caricature of events and accounts circulated by the Sons of Liberty: "It was happy for the prisoners, that evidence, taken in this manner, cannot be admitted in trials. Impressions, however, are sometimes made on the minds of men, who afterwards become jurors, which are not easily effaced."[103] There was a basis for all of the conspiracy stories being circulated among the British. Government supporters and radicals alike spread propaganda, such as the Pelham-Revere engraving (fig. 5.1), during the days following the Massacre. The engraving especially ignited fears of a British conspiracy—it

[103] Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 3: 201.

depicted another rifle firing out of a window of the Customs House, shooting with the soldiers at the helpless colonists.

The funeral for the victims was an extravagant affair, and the entire town watched as the procession of thousands of mourners followed the coffins around the Liberty Tree. Depositions taken by a committee in the days after the Massacre were taken haphazardly, and allegations were made that another party had altered many depositions. Witness accounts were riddled with contradictions and repeatedly changed, and numerous people accused others of perjury.[104] But while both sides tried to alter the outcomes of the trials, it seems that the members of the crowd planned their actions on March 5 in advance, while the soldiers did not previously know about such an altercation. Thirty-eight of the trials' witnesses actually testified that they knew a confrontation with the soldiers would occur, foreknowledge that contributed to what has sometimes been called a civilian plot to assault the soldiers.[105] John Adams even wrote in his diary that he "suspected that this was the explosion which had been intentionally wrought up by designing men, who knew what they were aiming at better than the instruments employed."[106] Adams used the word "designing" to denote a possible conspiracy. Regardless of whether these events were part of a larger conspiracy, the revolutionary-minded colonists clearly prepared ahead of time, and the plot unfolded when the fire bell rang.

Some historians are hesitant to connect various crowd activities during this time period or have criticized those who try to do so by way of the events' similarities. One of the most notable critiques is by Pauline Maier, who argues that few connections exist between mobs, and certainly

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[104] Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, 210-215, 297-298.
[105] John C. Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda*, (Stanford: California: Stanford University Press, 1936), 187.
[106] Charles Frances Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations, by his Grandson Charles Francis Adams,* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), 2: 230.

Figure 5.1. Revere's engraving clearly shows British soldiers firing in unison at helpless, unarmed American colonists. Captain Preston directs their volleys, and the soldiers shoot in a unified, linear formation. Another rifle fires along with the soldiers, and the colonists die, pray, beg the soldiers to cease their fire, and cart off their wounded comrades. The coloring, added by others, differs from print to print, but the soldiers' skin always appears darker than the colonists', even that of Crispus Attucks. The soldiers also grimace and wear coats the same color as the patriots' blood. *The bloody massacre perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5th 1770 by a party of the 29th Regt.* Engrav'd Printed & Sold by Paul Revere, 1770. *Library of Congress*, LC Control No. 2008661777.

there was no leadership group organizing the crowds in all circumstances. She specifically discusses the perceived lack of connections between the mob that attacked Oliver's house in 1765 and that which attacked the soldiers during the Massacre. She makes this assertion given that the former seemed more organized than the latter, and thereby assumes that they had two very different origins. Granted, the two crowds (and others from the time period) had different motivations and tactics, but one must also look at the reasons they were brought together and how the group was assembled. While examples exist of uncontrolled mobs gathering seemingly spontaneously, evidence suggests that the majority of those reacting to the Stamp Act and other actions by the British government were organized deliberately.[107]

Maier's initial observations, without further proof, are valid. These various crowd activities were not identical, and it could be argued that they were therefore not as connected as some historians argue. If one examines the primary sources, from both revolutionary and government-supporting sources, then the picture surrounding each mob becomes clearer. For example, Maier asserts that the Massacre mob was spontaneous and uncontrollable. But how did so many people learn that the bell did not signal a real fire? And how did they do so as quickly as they did? It can be asserted that there was prior communication of these plans, and that gathering the crowd initially stemmed from order. Someone rang the bell. Also, the soldiers immediately though the bell signaled a fire and did not question the people's initial assembly in the streets, and Bostonians had anticipated their reaction.

Maier also argues that the Sons of Liberty were not involved in the Boston Massacre, given that few of them are noted as being physically present, and others, like Thomas Marshall, deliberately avoided the conflict; she argues that Marshall seems not to have known what the

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[107] Pauline Maier, "Review: Revolutionary Violence and the Relevance of History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2, 1 (Summer 1971), 119-135.

commotion was about and why he had been prevented from leaving his house. Certainly Maier's assertion that these men were absent is correct, but she fails to examine why they would not be present. For Marshall's situation, the man provides no explanation for the warning he was given, but absent information does not necessarily mean it never existed. Marshall very well may have known the reason, but failed to report it. Certainly, a lack of evidence does not definitively prove a conspiracy, but the lack thereof should be noted. Given Quincy and Adams' behavior during the soldiers' trials, how the two deliberately attempted to avoid mentioning any organized resistance on the colonists' end, if Marshall had known he may not have publicly admitted it. Additionally, the Sons of Liberty and other revolutionary leaders worked with the crowds but were frequently less than thrilled with their tactics.[108] Many of these men incited others to riot, and then feigned a lack of knowledge about the event. Thus, any connection that existed between them and mob activities remained concealed.

The Massacre and use of the fire bell shows how fire began to gain added significance in colonial society—the use of the fire bell as a "false" alarm connected the "emergency" of the presence of British troops to the danger of a spreading fire. Bell-ringing articulated both of these threats to the populace, encouraging colonists to assemble and quash the threat. Just as Bostonians collected en masse to fight a fire, on March 5, they collected to respond to the perceived threat of the troops. People began to project their fear of fire onto contemporary situations, and allowed their past knowledge of conflagrations to color their reactions to these situations. Further, from the example of the Boston Massacre, Bostonians assembled under the pretence of extinguishing a conflagration, and government supporters recognized the link between the perception of fire and the development of an armed crowd.

[108] Ibid., 124-125.

"I WISH THIS CURSED PLACE WAS BURNED"
The Effects of Fire and Crowds on Government Supporters, 1765-1776

After seeing crowd actions under the leadership of Mackintosh, Francis Bernard was particularly concerned by the prospect of mob actions, and he expressed his fears through letters to his colleagues. In 1768, Bernard wrote to Lord Barrington to complain about the alleged use of the mob in Boston: "In Short, my Lord, Troops are not wanted here to quell a Riot or a Tumult, but to rescue the Government out of the hands of a trained mob, & to restore the Activity of the Civil Power, which is now entirely obstructed…Boston has been left under the uninterrupted Dominion of a Faction supported by a trained mob…" Bernard was extremely alarmed by the mob's power over the government, and constantly asked for help in "rescuing the government" from the crowds of infuriated inhabitants.[109]

The crowds, to Bernard, indicated an ongoing rebellion against the government. Bernard was petrified by the concept of the mob and the power he believed the colonists wielded on account of crowd action. Further, he constantly referred to the multitude as being "trained", indicating that he believed a more powerful leader or group of leaders controlled the crowds, and gave them instructions. Hutchinson also used the term "trained mob." While only some of these crowds were "trained" and conducted by outside leaders, men like Bernard and Hutchinson believed the mobs to be pawns directed by Whig leadership. These fears led such men to react in particular ways to crowd actions.

Thomas Hutchinson had a complex relationship with crowds and with fire. A Boston-born statesman, Hutchinson enjoyed several years of trust by the public before his dramatic fall from grace as the Revolution approached. He served as a scapegoat in both America and England

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[109] Governor Bernard to Lord Barrington, Boston, July 20, 1768, *The Barrington-Bernard Correspondence*, 167-168.

for the outbreak of the Revolution, and his career culminated in his exile to Britain, where he died. John Adams actually believed he died from fear of the throngs involved in the Gordon Riots, and wrote to his wife that "Governor Hutchinson fell down dead at the first appearance of Mobs."[110] During his life, Hutchinson was constantly concerned about crowd actions in Boston, always referring to large gatherings of revolutionaries as "mobs," alluding to their collective, violent actions and goals; however, he also felt that there was a purpose behind some crowds, asserting that "mobs, a sort of them at least, are constitutional." After the Boston Massacre, for instance, he said that "the people of this province, that they seldom, if ever, have assembled in a tumultuous manner unless they have been oppressed."[111] Hutchinson's work and correspondences provide valuable evidence into loyalists' relationships with fire. Further, they help illustrate the loyalist leadership's fear of conflagrations, and show the reverse side of revolutionaries' attempts to intimidate the friends of the government.

Hutchinson had property destroyed by a crowd and his life threatened before the 1760s. In 1749, Hutchinson attempted to institute his idea for a new currency program, involving the adoption of silver specie. As a result, Hutchinson's popularity plummeted. The town removed him as Boston's representative and "more than once [he] was threatened with destruction by some of the people of the town." At least one of the threats came to fruition when his Boston house burned down seemingly without cause. Historian William Pencak noted that following this episode, the local fire brigade did not come extinguish the flames, and locals watching cried out: "Let it burn."[112] The fact that the fire company refused to attend indicates that they were politically motivated to let the house burn down. This group made their feelings known by their

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[110] John Adams to Abigail Adams, June 17, 1780, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 3: 366-367.
[111] William Pencak, *America's Burke: The Mind of Thomas Hutchinson*, (Washington, D.C.: United Press of America, Inc., 1982), 27, quotation.
[112] Ibid., 15, quotation.

inaction, similar to the antics of the Anti-Stamp Fire Society in 1765. Hutchinson was becoming painfully aware of the colonists' anger and quickly realized that he was unable to help their anger dissipate.

Thomas Gage suspected that the crowds themselves were not the main problem, but important Whigs. He deduced that local leaders instigated the crowds, blaming lawyers and merchants as his primary suspects: "They whole Body of Merchants in general, Assembly Men, Magistrates, &c. have been united in this Plan of Riots, and without the Influence and Instigation of these [the lawyers] the inferior People would have been quiet. Very great Pains was taken to rouse them before they Stirred. The Sailors who are the only People who may be properly Stiled Mob, are entirely at the Command of the Merchants who employ them."[113] Not only did Gage feel that the upper echelons of American society incited the lower class to stage riots, but he felt these leaders then referred directly to the "unruly Populace" in their letters to British officials, trying to "terrify and frighten the People of England into a Repeal of the Act." In correspondences to Britain, these Americans allegedly blamed the crowds for these demonstrations, despite Gage's suspicion that they actually "encouraged [the riots], and many perhaps joined them." Whether or not this was actually the case, even high ranking officials such as Gage were disturbed by the prospect of a colonial conspiracy against the British government. Gage expressed these concerns as early as 1765.[114]

Gage tried to convince some of these leaders to join him in opposition of the rest of the revolutionary movement, even going so far as to bribe some; but for the most part, the leaders

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[113] Major General Gage to Right Honorable Conway, December 21, 1765. *The Correspondence of General Thomas Gage with the Secretaries of State 1763-1775*, Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., 2 vols., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931), 1: 79.
[114] Ibid., 1: 78-79.

refused to abandon their cause.[115] Indeed, their actions confirmed Gage's suspicions of a colonial conspiracy. For instance, John Adams wrote in his diary as early as 1769 that he had "supped with Mr. Otis, in company with Mr. [Samuel] Adams, Mr. William Davis, and Mr. John Gill. The Evening spent in preparing the next day's newspaper—a curious employment, cooking up paragraphs, articles, occurrences, & c., working the political engine!"[116] These men were, as Gage suspected, conspiring, and using local media to deliberately incite anger among the colonists.

Historians Edmund and Helen Morgan argue that it was the merchants and politicians who controlled the Loyal Nine's activities, and thereby indirectly controlled the mobs. Hutchinson, like Gage, also suspected that merchants and other higher members of society were somehow involved. He wrote to Governor Pownall on March 6, 1766,

> It will be some amusement to you to have a more circumstantial account of the present model of government among us. I will begin with the lowest branch partly legislative partly executive. This consists of the rabble of the town of Boston headed by one Mackintosh who I imagine you never heard of. He is a bold fellow and as likely for a Massianello as you can well conceive. When there is occasion to hang or burn effigies or pull down houses these are employed; but since government has been brought to a system they are somewhat controuled by a superior set consisting of the master-mason carpenters, &c., of the town….When anything of more importance is to be determined as opening the custom house of any matters of trade these are under the direction of a committee of merchants Mr. Rowe at their head then Molyneux Solomon Davis, &c., but all affairs of a general meeting of the inhabitants of Boston where Otis with his mobbish eloquence prevails in every motion, and the town first determine what is necessary to be done and then apply either to the Governor and council or resolve that it is necessary the general count should meet and it must be a very extraordinary resolve indeed that is not carried into execution.[117]

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[115] David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 38.
[116] September 3, 1769, *Works of John Adams*, 2: 219.
[117] Massachusetts Archives, XXVI, 207-214.

The Morgans point out other evidence that suggests merchants were involved in the riots, just as Hutchinson and other government leaders suspected.[118]

As a result of increasing instances of Boston crowd action in the 1760s and 1770s, Hutchinson wrote in his diary on September 2, 1774 (while living in London) that "I never knew what mobbing was before. I am sick enough of the confusion and uproar." He also noted that increasing accounts of mobs appeared in the newspapers, and many Tories fled to Boston after being threatened by the mobs in outlying areas of the colony.[119] Revolutionary leaders threatened mob violence even as they tried to reason with government officials.[120] Though it is difficult to say definitively if Americans did stir British crowds, Britons blamed them for many public uprisings. They noticed that British subjects engaged in a public, particularly American, style of protest. Britain experienced its share of popular protests, but disgruntled Britons seemed to react differently after the watching American protests in the 1760s and 1770s, particularly in their use of fire. Furthermore, Hutchinson later wrote in his *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay* that "[i]t requires no small degree of fortitude to stand against a popular torrent, when it runs with violence."[121] While he does not use a fire metaphor to describe the crowds here, Hutchinson found it increasingly difficult to oppose crowd actions, and wanted credit for his attempts to do so. He did not know how to handle Bostonians' threats of mob violence, and his frustration meant that the revolutionaries' tactics were working.

Hutchinson's fears increased when revolutionary leadership threatened to deploy crowds in Boston as a means of coercion. He noted how "the select men of Boston were waiting the

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[118] Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 191.
[119] Ibid, 247.
[120] Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 397.
[121] Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 3: 143.

lieutenant-governor's coming to council and, being admitted, made their representation, that, from the contentions arising from the troops quartered in Boston, and, above all, from the tragedy of the last night [the Boston Massacre], the minds of the inhabitants were exceedingly disturbed; that they would presently be assembled in a town meeting; and that, unless the troops should be removed, the most terrible consequences were to be expected."[122] The selectmen intimidated the lieutenant governor with crowd action and riots, and he took note. He had tried to stop the mob for years, but was realizing that his efforts were futile.

Hutchinson knew that fire could be used against Boston by the British. Specifically, in September of 1775, Hutchinson was concerned that British troops, upon leaving Boston, would set fire to the city. He wrote to a friend in Britain that "I suppose it's probable the troops will remove from Boston before winter. I wish they may not be obliged to do it, but I find it is the general expectation that they will. In conversation with a gentleman arrived from the Army, he discovered his opinion, that upon quitting the town, they would set fire to it, and reduce it to asshes [sic], and gave this reason, that it would strike terror and cause all other sea-port towns to expect the same fate."[123] Hutchinson, in the letter, beseeched his friend to try to alter these plans. While Hutchinson admitted to owning multiple houses in Boston and was worried about their safety (although he was no longer physically in Boston), he also argued that the people of Boston would only become angrier. Interestingly, he felt that using the mob's weapon against it would be counter-productive, that the inhabitants would not be as affected by the use of fire as the British and loyalists seemed to be. Like crowds, authority too had fire as a weapon in their

[122] Ibid., 3: 197.
[123] Peter Orlando Hutchinson, *The Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, Esq., Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief of His Late Majesty's Province of Massachusetts Bay, in North America; Complied From the Original Documents Still Remaining in the Possession of His Descendants*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1885), 534.

arsenal, but for some reason, it was not nearly as effective. Ever since they harnessed its power for themselves, Revolutionary Bostonians seemed to be immune to fire.

The Lieutenant Governor was not the only government supporter who worried about magnifying the revolutionaries' rage and the possible threat to Boston. In a letter to his brother-in-law (and Hutchinson's son), Elisha, Peter Oliver described the state of Boston in the spring of 1775, and the dangers he felt were posed to himself and the city. "We are every hour expecting an attack by land or water. All marketing from the country stopt ever since the Battle. Fire and slaughter hourly threatened, and not out of danger from some of the inhabitants within, of setting the town [on] fire. All the interest the Judge and I [owned] in Middleborough exposed to the ravage of a set of robbers, Mr. Conant at the head of them…. we have heard since the Battle, that a number set out to destroy and burn our interest, but that the Selectmen interposed and saved them."[124] He went further, saying that Elisha did not fully comprehend the tempers of the revolutionaries in Boston, or how much danger he was in, ending the letter with: "By the time this reaches you havvock will begin, and whether we shall ever see one another in this world, I am not clear in, but hope we shall meet in another quite different from this, free from storms, from Battles, from fire and famine, from *Rebellion*, the worst of *crimes*…"[125] Oliver was convinced that the British would ultimately triumph, but feared the destruction the war would cause. He was afraid of the fire he felt would be used by the British troops, but he was predominantly concerned about fire used as a weapon by the colonists. Thomas Gage also had no positive suggestion as to how to manage the colonists' anger. He tried to take "every Precaution in my Power; for it is impossible to foresee, considering the Anarchy that has so long Subsisted in Boston, and the Poison that has been continualy thrown into the People, by Numberless

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[124] Hutchinson, *The Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, Esq*, 459.
[125] Ibid., 459.

Seditious Publications, Resolves, Votes and Instructions, how far the Madness of the People may carry them."[126] He hated Boston, writing in 1775: "I wish this cursed place was burned."[127]

Other Britons used fire to express their dislike of America. In May of 1776, a British newspaper reported on a discussion about the war in the Plough Inn, located in Sudbury. Several people arrived with a paper they called the American Gazette, and read it to group of tradesmen and other individuals. The group "unanimously condemned it to the flames" because they determined that the paper's authors "calculated to stir up sedition against his Majesty's person and government." Soon after, these feelings led the assembly to kindle a bonfire on Stour Hill, "where the said paper was publicly burnt before a great number of spectators." Interestingly, these Britons gathered a crowd with a bonfire, in order to express their discontent with the supposed conspiracy of the colonists against the Crown—just as Bostonians did to express their frustrations and draw others to their cause. Furthermore, "while it was burning, a person solemnly repeated, 'So may the schemes of America, that are formed against the government of Great Britain, fall to the dust.'" The festivities concluded with fireworks and the crowd "drinking success to his Majesty's arms."[128] These Britons, in opposing the colonists, used revolutionary colonial techniques to voice their aggravation. Whether or not they did so consciously, the British crowd acknowledged Americans' methods. The colonists and the Britons shared a common background with bonfires; either both Bostonians and Britons drew upon the same fiery traditions, or this ceremonial burning and public gathering specifically mimicked Boston's actions only years before.

[126] Thomas Gage to Hillsborough, *The Correspondence of General Thomas* Gage, 1: 268.
[127] Gage to Barrington, June 25, 1775. As quoted in Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, 31.
[128] *Middlesex Journal*, May 7, 1776.

Both Americans and Britons valued the ability to control fires, both physical and symbolic. Given the wide practice of using fire during crowd protests, Bostonians able to set and effectively manage the flames had important functions in those exploits. Firewards in particular were instrumental in the British resistance. Roughly two-thirds of the firewards between 1759 and 1776 were members of the Sons of Liberty.[129] The number of current or future members of

[129] *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes From 1770 to 1777*, (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, No. 39 Arch Street, 1887); *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes From 1758 to 1769*, (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, No. 39 Arch Street), 1887.

Although the Sons of Liberty organization did not begins until 1765, there is a pattern, starting in 1759, of future Sons of Liberty being elected as firewards. The following chart depicts the growing numbers of Sons of Liberty as compared to other elected firewards during these years:

Year	**Number of future Sons of Liberty to overall number of firewards**
1759	6/12
1760	7/12
1761	8/12
1762	9/12
1763	9/12
1764	12/16
1765	10/16
1766	10/16
1767	10/16
1768	11/16
1769	11/16
1770	11/15
1771	10/15
1772	11/16
1773	10/16
1774	10/16
1775	11/16
1776	11/16

177 of the total 265 firewards elected between 1759 and 1776 (roughly 67%) were at some point Sons of Liberty. Interestingly, there is a steady progression of future members being elected firewards. Certainly, there are various reasons why a colonist would want to be elected to this position during a specific year, but the Sons of Liberty's steadily increasing presence, as well as their eventual and maintained majority starting in 1764 and continuing until 1776, is notable. These men may have looked to become more involved in the protest against Britain, and one way of doing so and reaching out to their fellow colonists was by way of fireward positions and fire companies. It is difficult to determine whether these men became firewards in order to be more involved in the resistance of if they

this organization (those who would attend the August 14, 1769 meeting) steadily increased from 1759 to the year of the Stamp Act crisis, 1765, at which point the number of Sons of Liberty remained fairly constant. Three Loyal Nine members were involved in fire companies and all were elected firewards after the formation of the Sons of Liberty (one was a member of Engine Company Number 7 as of 1734, but became a fireward in 1775; the other two were elected firewards in 1775 and 1785). Samuel Adams and John Hancock also were elected firewards in 1766, one year after the Stamp Act protests. There is a pattern, and it is significant that these influential patriots joined the battle against fire so late in the revolutionary movement.

It is not necessarily important that so many Sons of Liberty served as firewards, but that many Sons of Liberty and other Whig leaders had direct knowledge about setting and preventing fires. There could be numerous reasons why these men became firewards when they did—it may have taken some time to become financially viable enough or popular enough to be elected, they may have been previously too busy to be involved in politics or in this area specifically, or perhaps they simply had no interest in pursuing such a position for several years. What is notable is that the majority of the town's firewards during the primary events leading up to the Revolution were current Sons of Liberty or soon to join the cause. It is also notable that perhaps twenty-nine Sons of Liberty were enginemen, and at least nine enginemen participated in the Boston Tea Party, lead by two recently elected firewards. Clearly, the influence of enginemen and firewards could be felt in a variety of revolutionary activities.[130] They had knowledge of firefighting as well as revolutionary activities, and knew how to combine them if need be. Many men began their political careers in fire companies, but individuals like Loyal Nine members

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were already prominent revolutionaries and joined because of their role in society or as a means of increasing their standing; in either case, the role of fireward could be tied to political activism, and the steady increase of Sons of Liberty serving as firewards is not a coincidence.

[130] Benjamin L. Carp, "Fire of Liberty: Firefighters, Urban Voluntary Culture, and the Revolutionary Movement," *The William and Mary Quarterly,* 58, 4, (Oct., 2001), 810.

joined after they were already prominent members of their communities and the fight for independence. It is certainly plausible that these men were using fire as a means of furthering their already established political agendas.

Firewards, knew about the types of large fires seen in Boston, and had the ability to direct their firemen and the public when dealing with a conflagration. People were ordered by law to obey them during rescue efforts, but attempts in 1770 to pass a law making disobeying a fireward illegal failed during a town meeting.[131] This motion was presented to the meeting on March 13, 1770, right after the most recent installment of an ongoing discussion about the events on King Street several days before. But why address this proposal at that moment? Business was being conducted as usual in the town meeting, but the majority of its time in March was spent addressing the Massacre. There was at least one incident an hour or so before the Massacre where individuals refused to help or allow Thomas Marshall, a fireward, to rush to what he thought was a real fire; maybe those present at the town meeting knew of a connection between the crowd on March 5 and firemen. Perhaps revolutionaries wanted to ensure that crowds could set fires and refuse to help extinguish them, regardless of the interests of the local fireward.

Fire clubs also held significance in Boston. These gatherings were different than other voluntary societies. They served as arenas for the exchange of ideas and political mobilization, but they also dealt with society's newfound symbolism for the resistance—fire. John Adams noted in a 1774 letter that "[i]t is of some Importance in Boston to belong to a Fire Clubb and to choose and get admitted to a good one."[132] These fire clubs were "composed of the most substantial citizens."[133] The clubs tended to remain small and continually "club-like", with the

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[131] *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes From 1770 to 1777*, 14.
[132] John Adams to William Tudor, Jr., July 24, 1774, *William Tudor Papers* (Massachusetts Historical Society).
[133] Rowe, *Letters and Diary of John Rowe*, 57.

constant formation of new clubs by men excluded from others.[134] The firewards also spent time together outside of their formal duties; John Rowe mentioned spending "the evening at home with the firewards" in 1767, where the group dined and enjoyed each others company for hours.[135] Rowe also noted several other occasions where he spent time with the other firemen at his fire company. Fires held a particular significance to Rowe, who noted many of the local conflagrations in his diary. The closeness of firewards and members of fire companies can help illuminate the spread of ideas, and explain how so many of these individuals became involved in the revolutionary movement.

While many Sons of Liberty served as firewards, and participated in fire clubs and fire companies, the Loyal Nine also had many connections to fire and firefighting organizations outside of Boston. The Sons of Liberty group in Charleston, South Carolina, originated in the town's Fireman's Association. A similar situation occurred in Philadelphia, where the "Heart-and-Hand Fire Company" was the original seat of the local Sons of Liberty. While the Boston chapter of the Sons of Liberty grew out of the Caucus Club, members of fire clubs and companies also played important roles in the fight against Britain. Charleston and Philadelphia show just how influential fire companies were as places to exchange ideas, discuss radical politics, and enact change.[136]

Dirk Hoerder suggests that the Loyal Nine lost influence among the populace in the "violent period" of 1767 to 1776, only resurfacing in the public eye after 1776 when the loyalists had left Boston.[137] After this time period, multiple Sons of Liberty were elected to public office, with two serving as firewards. Cleverly and Crafts may have decided to run for the positions of

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[134] Richard D. Brown, "The Emergence of Urban Society in Rural Massachusetts, 1760-1820." *Journal of American* History, 61, (1974), 42.
[135] Rowe, *Letters and Diary of John Rowe*, 123.
[136] Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda*, 52.
[137] Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts*, 142.

firewards arbitrarily, considering Edes and Avery were elected to other public positions. But their decision to undertake the roles of fire wardens is significant. If the decision was not arbitrary, why did they choose fireward over any other position? Perhaps this was an attempt by the two to manage what was still a large element of spontaneous, seemingly uncontrolled activity in Boston—fire, or to control the spreading of the metaphorical flame of liberty.

As Benjamin Carp argues, firemen's "status as prominent city-dwellers guaranteed their participation in the movement for Independence." Firemen typically had connections to other civic leaders and prominent members of the community, and these connections proved valuable to those trying to mobilize the colonists. Firemen also already were organized into groups of civic-minded men, hailing from all echelons of society.[138] Firewards and firemen undoubtedly participated in mob activities, whether or not their presence was known. What is even more impressive than the fire personnel's involvement, however, is how fire likewise influenced the revolutionary actions of laymen. Whig leaders acknowledged their need and desire to work with the public, knowing that one powerful way to do so was by using fire symbolism. Bostonians willingly stood behind firemen as they set and controlled fires, and operated within predetermined fire protocol in order to conceal their plans. The British and loyalists also tried to sway their colleagues and threaten colonists with fire terminology, calling up their past experiences with and feelings towards fire in order to encourage them to act in a certain manner.

The ability to control fires and use them as weapons became increasingly important as the war progressed. Fire symbolism was still employed by Britons in 1775, who called for the control of America's metaphorical flames of liberty. The *Virginia Gazette* printed an excerpt from a letter written on June 6, and sent from Plymouth, England. The author of the letter remarked how "the whole country here is in great consternation about the fire kindled in

[138] Carp, "Fire of Liberty," 817.

America." The author also called for religious officials to "quench the flames of zeal for liberty."[139] But the ability to control and rely on fire also influenced the actions of military officials, just as it had helped civilians participating in crowd actions in the 1760s. As the War for Independence continued, officials on both sides of the conflict focused on fire as a weapon of war.

On September 18, 1775, John Adams recorded in his diary that John Macpherson, a man "reputed to be well skilled in naval Affairs," asked to speak with him in private: "Is sanguine, confident, positive, that he can take or burn every Man of War, in America.—It is a Secret, he says. But he will communicate it to any one Member of Congress upon Condition, that it be not divulged during his Life at all, nor after his Death but for the Service of this Country. He says it is as certain as that he shall die, that he can burn any Ship." Macpherson may have promoted the use of fire ships, flat-bottomed boats that would be filled with flammable material, placed near an enemy's watercraft, and ignited, creating a floating inferno the enemy could not extinguish.[140] Seven days later, Macpherson dined with Adams and renewed "his Proposals of taking or burning Ships." He also approached George Washington and Benjamin Franklin with his idea, and the proposal was sent to a Congressional committee who "thought it, in theory, practicable, and wished it to be tried in Boston harbor." Washington believed that the plan, if it were to be executed against the British fleet in the Boston harbor, would be too costly and might not succeed. He suggested that Macpherson communicate his plan to artillery officials, but the latter abandoned the idea soon after this suggestion.[141]

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[139] *Virginia Gazette*, September 8, 1775.
[140] Jack Coggins, *Ships and Seamen of the American Revolution*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1969), 40.
[141] L.H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, *Diary 1771-1781*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1961), 2: 176; George Washington to the President of Congress, November 8, 1775, *The Writings of George Washington*, Worthington Chauncy Ford, ed., (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), 3: 202.

American military officials actually did contemplate burning the town of Boston "in order to force the enemy to evacuate it." John Hancock, when consulted on this matter, approved this tactic, saying that "although the greater part of his fortune consisted in buildings within the town, yet, if its destruction would be useful to the cause of the country, that this circumstance should be no impediment to its being set on fire immediately."[142] Adams agreed that Boston would have to be sacrificed to ensure victory. "The Town of Boston, for ought I see, must suffer Martyrdom:" he wrote to his wife in May of 1774, "It must expire: And our principle Consolation is, that it dies in a noble Cause."[143] Dr. Jeremy Belknap, founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, noticed during a dinner in October 1775 that three of his dining partners "*wished to see Boston in Flames*." Washington was supposed to have joined this gathering, but was prevented by the weather. This is the only sentence in the entry that is italicized, indicating its importance to Belknap. He became quite alarmed at this information, and had to be reassured days later that "there was no design to make an assault upon Boston very soon, and that it would not be done unless it was found that nothing else could be done."[144] While Boston never suffered this fate, revolutionary leaders considered burning one of their own towns to be a distinct possibility.

Adams must have been influenced by Macpherson's scheme. He advocated using fire as a weapon against the British troops in the Boston Harbor, and during the spring of 1776, he corresponded with James Warren on numerous occasions about the necessity of fire ships. Adams "had a great opinion of the Efficacy of Fire, both in Rafts and Ships, for the Defence of that Harbour." He asked Warren why "cannot Fire be employed as a Defence? I mean Fire Ships

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[142] William Tudor, *The Life of James Otis, of Massachusetts*, (Boston: Wells and Lilly—Court Street, 1823), 266.
[143] Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1: 107.
[144] Jeremy Belknap, "Journal of my Tour to the Camp, and the Observations I made there," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 4, (Boston: 1858-1860), 83-84.

and Fire Rafts? Cannot Gallies or floating Batteries by used to Advantage?" In early May 1776, Warren told Adams that Boston was in fact preparing fire ships, but Adams continued to broach the subject. One month later, Adams wrote a letter "in haste only to inclose to you a little Treatise upon Fire Ships." He remarked that "this art [of crafting fire ships] carries Terror and Dismay along with it, and the very Rumour of Preparations in this Kind may do you more service than many Battalions." Adams recognized that fire could still incite fear among the British troops.[145]

British troops also targeted American cities, and burned many of them. In engaging in this total warfare, they tried to destroy colonists' will to fight by igniting American towns. Many colonists, albeit frustrated at the loss of their property, refused to let the British do so. In a letter to Abigail Adams, written in September 1780, John Thaxter observed that "the original Spirit seems to have revived—may the English feel its Energy. The loss of Charlestown [South Carolina] may prove great gain. The English made a great handle of this Acquisition and their Adherents have endeavoured to cast 'Shadows, Clouds and darkness' upon our prospect, but the flames of Springfield and Tarry Town have dissipated them. The burning of Villages (tho' distressing to Individuals) has no bad effect upon the Confederacy at large. It rouses up a spirit of Indignation and Resentment, and kindles a flame pure in its birth, rapid in its growth and terrible in its Consequences."[146] Both Britons and Americans struggled to control Boston's physical and metaphorical flames, and for Americans, managing fire proved even more crucial in later years.

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[145] John Adams to James Warren, March 29, 1776; 216, John Adams to James Warren, April 16, 1776, 226; James Warren to John Adams, May 8, 1776, 239; John Adams to James Warren, June 9, 1776, 256; *Warren-Adams Letters*, vol. 72.
[146] John Thaxter to Abigail Adams, Paris, 19th Septr. 1780. *Adams Family Correspondence*, L.H. Butterfield and Marc Friedlaender, ed., vol. 3, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1973), 418.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES
Extinguishing a Fire in Boston and Reigniting it in London, 1776-1786

Americans' fears of fire and conspiracy filtered into their attempts to create state governments. As Massachusetts representatives worked to draft a state constitution, their fears were reflected in their correspondence and ultimately, their new government. In April 1776, John Ashley of Berkshire County wrote to the General Court about those opposing the anticipated new state government. Ashley called these people as "unthinking, rash, and designing men" and "incendiaries" who "inflame" others.[147] Approximately a year and a half later, Worcester's Committee of Correspondence wrote that they wished "not to inflame & excite passions but to promote & cement Union & harmony among us," which they deemed vital to the success of the United States.[148] Not only did these representatives rely on fire symbolism, but they started worrying about maintaining order in the state. To preserve the government's power over the people, the new government would have to address the issue of crowd action. After years of debate, the Massachusetts constitution finally passed, and contained within it measures to control and limit crowd gatherings. The document addressed how "every subject of the Commonwealth ought to find a certain remedy, by having recourse to the laws, for all injuries or wrongs which he may receive in his person, property, or character." The people also had "the right, in an orderly and peaceable manner, to assemble to consult upon the common good" and address any grievances.[149]

That said, the constitution addressed how the governor could rely on armed forces to "kill, slay and destroy, if necessary…all and every such person and persons as shall, at any time

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[147] Petition of John Ashley *et al*. to the General Court, April 12, 1776, *Massachusetts, Colony to Commonwealth: Documents on the Formation of Its Constitution, 1775-1780*, Robert J. Taylor, ed., (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 23-24.
[148] Worcester Answers Pittsfield, October 8, 1778, Ibid, 97.
[149] The Constitution of 1780, Ibid., 129-130.

hereafter, in a hostile manner attempt or enterprise the destruction, invasion, detriment, or annoyance of the Commonwealth." The governor could also use the militia "in time of war or invasion, and also in times of rebellion."[150] The constitution gave the governor specific powers to diffuse rebellions and violent gatherings. Those who drafted this document favored citizens' ability to voice their opinions or discontent, but only if they did so peacefully. Violent crowd actions would no longer be tolerated.

John Adams wrote the first version of the Massachusetts state constitution, and drafted a pamphlet entitled *Report of a Constitution or Form of Government for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* between September 13 and mid-October, 1779. Although this was not Adams' original draft, the committee made few changes to it and the Report closely resembles the final ratified constitution. Adams gave copies of the *Report* to Constitutional Convention delegates, and brought some copies with him on his trip to Europe on November 15. Adams handed out copies to people in France and Holland, and had the document printed in Paris in the spring of 1780. He also sent it to several people in London, and there was some debate in London over the origins and authorship of Adams' Report and the copy of the Massachusetts Constitution which Franklin brought to Europe. Therefore, the new Massachusetts constitution circulated throughout Europe in the spring of 1780, allowing Londoners to read the document and make themselves aware of Massachusetts' new way of handling rebellions.[151]

After years fighting fires in America, London found itself confronted by its own incendiary crowd in June 1780. Fire was a vital component to the Gordon Riots, as it was in Boston crowd actions. The furious crowd of Londoners disassembled several buildings, including Newgate Prison and Langdale's Distillery, often setting the buildings and their

[150] Ibid., 129-130.
[151] Butterfield, *Diary and Autobiography*, 2: 413-414; John Adams to Samuel Perley, June 19, 1809, Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, 9: 622-623.

contents on fire. Crowds specifically targeted Catholics and supporters of the Relief Act. At one point during the several-day riots, over thirty-six fires burned at once, and bystanders quickly tried to remove themselves and their furniture from their houses to avoid falling victim to the flames. Susan Burney recorded her observations of the riots in letters to her sister, and described the many bonfires set as rioters destroyed buildings. After witnessing a crowd burning the contents of a house, she wrote that "such a scene I never before beheld!—as it grew dusk, the wretches who were involved in smoak and cover'd wth. dust at the bottom of the street, wth. the flames glaring upon them & the fires between them & us, seemed like so many *Infernals*, & their actions contributed to assist the resemblance they bore, for more fury & rage than they shewed in demolishing everything they met with cannot be conceived."[152]

The flames and firelight led Burney to use specific imagery, and contributed to her understanding of the riots. She immediately compared the rioters to "infernals" after seeing them in front of the bonfire, linking the crowd to her fear of the devil, and her understanding of fire led her to fear the crowds that much more. Burney noted how the crowd resembled "furies" and other mythological figures. The torches and firebrands moving through the streets made the "Mob" look like a moving bonfire. At the climax of the riots, historian George Rudé notes, "London appeared to onlookers to be a sea of flames."[153] In fact, this was not the first time London resembled a sea of flames—witnesses to the Fire of 1666 invoked similar imagery. This prior instance certainly influenced onlookers' reactions to those fires in 1780, and made the Gordon Riot crowds seem that much more menacing. Also, when British soldiers burned various

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[152] Susan Burney, "Letter Extract 2: The Gordon Riots, St. Martin's Lane, London, 8 June 1780," *The Susan Burney Letters Project*, (University of Nottingham, <www.nottingham.ac.uk/hrc/projects/burney/letters/gordon.phtml>), 4-6.

[153] Ibid., 4-6; George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England 1730-1848*, (London: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964), 59.

American cities during the war, inhabitants described those scenes in similar terms.[154] Prior conflagrations on both continents clearly shaped Londoners' reactions to the Gordon Riots.

Burney also recorded how "one thing was remarkable, & convinced me that this mob was secretly directed by some body above themselves—they brot. an *Engine* with them, & while they pull'd Hyde's House to pieces & threw every thing they found in it into the flames, they order'd the Engine to play on the neighbouring Houses, to prevent their catching fire—a precaution wch. it seems has been taken in every place that these lawless Rioters have thot. fit to attack." Horace Walpole also noticed this, writing that "one strange circumstance in the late delirium was the mixture of rage and consideration in the mob. In most of the fires they threw furniture into the street, did not burn it *in* the houses; nay, made several small bonfires lest a large one should spread to buildings. They would not suffer engines to play on the devoted edifices; yet, the moment the objects were consumed, played the engines on contiguous houses on each side!"[155] Despite the crowd's seemingly disorderly and diabolical conduct (as perceived by onlookers such as Burney), someone had thought ahead and brought fire engines to prevent any unintentional fires. Burney and other eye witnesses worried that the fires would get out of control despite the presence of the fire engines, but they never did. This contradiction (the fact that the infernal furies tried their best to prevent the fire from spreading to neighboring houses) presents a complex image of this crowd—both its actions and how others saw those actions.[156]

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[154] *The New-York Packet*, December 4, 1777; John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 17, 1775, Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1: 241; John Holyoke to his wife, June 16, 1775, "Extracts from Letters written at the Time of the Occupation of Boston by the British, 1775-1776," *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute*, vol. 8, (Salem: Essex Institute, 1877), 212.

[155] Horace Walpole and Peter Cunningham, *The letters of Horace Walpole, earl of Orford*, vol. 7, (London: Bradbury and Evans, Printers, 1858), 401.

[156] Thomas Holcroft, *A Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances in the Cities of London and Westminster*, (London: Fielding and Walker, 1780), 39; Burney, "Letter Extract 2: The Gordon Riots, St. Martin's Lane, London, 8 June 1780," 4-6; Carol Houlihan Flynn, "Whatever Happened to the Gordon Riots?" *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel and Culture*, Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia, ed., (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 465-470.

In spite of the crowd's seemingly organized approach to leveling houses as presented by Burney, the Gordon Riots were not entirely controlled and systematic. Other bystanders and journalists viewed the crowd as "a lawless and unprincipled rabble" and "mad men."[157] Based on the crowds' exploits, though, these descriptions are inappropriate and result from the observers' anti-crowd bias. The crowds, in fact, were generally not interested in robbing their victims or in monetary rewards. Ignatius Sancho wrote that the Sardinian ambassador "offered 500 guineas to the rabble to save a picture of our Savior from the flames, and 1000 guineas not to destroy an exceedingly fine organ: The gentry told him, they would burn him if they could get at him and destroyed the picture and organ directly."[158] The crowd focused intently on destroying specifically targeted property, and the ambassador's bribe was ignored.

After the flames died, Londoners looked for someone to blame. Much like various groups before them, inhabitants immediately suspected a conspiracy behind the disturbances. Rumors swirled around the city that France, Spain, or America incited the crowd, and the concept of Americans' involvement was particularly appealing. Britons still remembered the bizarre set of occurrences in 1776, when a man under the alias John the Painter attempted to set fire to multiple towns, docksides, and residences in Britain. Allegedly, Silas Deane and Edward Bancroft, Americans living in Britain, paid him to set some of the fires.[159] Britons blamed Americans for conflagrations years before June of 1780, so these accusations were not unprecedented. Even more suspiciously, many participants in the riots supported America in its quest for liberties and strongly wanted the war to end. Within days of the riots' conclusion, the Privy Council arrested

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[157] Holcroft, *A Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots*, 39; Burney, "Letter Extract 2: The Gordon Riots, St. Martin's Lane, London, 8 June 1780," 4-6; Flynn, "Whatever Happened to the Gordon Riots?," 465-470.
[158] Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, (London: 1803), 272-273.
[159] Jessica Warner, *The Incendiary: The Misadventures of John the Painter, First Modern Terrorist*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004); "A summary account of the life, trial, and confession of John the Painter," *London Magazine*, March 1777.

American James Smith, as "the Catiline of the conspiracy and the secret agent of Dr. Franklin to burn the city." Council members lacked sufficient evidence to put Smith on trial, however, and they soon released him.[160] Britons suspected several other Americans, but much to their frustration, could never find any proof of the Americans' involvement. Benjamin Franklin in fact did not seem to have any prior knowledge of the crowd action, but he did express his support for the burning of Lord Mansfield's estate, remarking that "he, who approved the burning of American houses, has had fire brought home to him."[161] He also wrote that in another letter "if [the crowd] had done no other Mischief, I would have more easily excused them…those who have approved the Burning our poor People's Houses and Towns should taste a little of the Effects of Fire themselves."[162] Eventually, the Britons stopped trying to hold America responsible for the riots when their conspiracy theories proved unfounded. The similarities between the Gordon Riots and revolutionary crowd action in America, though, are certainly striking.[163]

Britons continued to rely on incendiary symbolism, though, even targeting Thomas Hutchinson. Upon Hutchinson's death in 1780, at least one British newspaper reported that his "Misrepresentations have added Fuel to the unnatural War which has been kindled against America. Examples are necessary; and there is Reason to wish, that all Incendiaries may not escape into the Grave, without a previous Appearance, either at the Gibbet, or on the Scaffold." Some Britons disliked Hutchinson so much that even they hoped that "his Sins may be buried

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[160] James Smith to John Jay, Brussels, Sept. 12, 1780, *Papers of John Jay* (Special Collections, Columbia University Libraries).
[161] Franklin to William Carmichael, June 17, 1780, Albert Henry Smyth ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 8, (New York: 1887-1888), 99.
[162] Franklin to Samuel Wharton, June 17, 1780; Ibid., 95.
[163] Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers: The Great Powers and American Independence*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 84-85.

with him in the Tomb." They even referred to him as an "incendiary" who "kindled" the war against the colonies. This rhetoric further connects the Riots with their American counterparts.[164]

The purpose of the Gordon Riots and the methods crowds employed differed from crowd actions in Boston. There are some notable similarities between the crowds, though, that may signal a flow of information between America and Britain. Crowds in both locations used fire and fire engines (maybe organized and operated by firefighters) in order to illustrate their disgruntlement and influence others. The Gordon Riots profoundly affected British political leaders. As historian Colin Haydon argues, "London seemed out of control, and the disturbances highlighted the dangers of a weak state in the face of a major outbreak of popular violence. In particular, attacks on buildings like Newgate and the Bank of England were, in the eyes of the magistrates, proof that the mob had no regard for the existing order."[165]

Leaders in both locations also fretted about the rioters' use of fire. In both cases, fire not only posed a physical danger to the cities, but also endangered the government's control over the inhabitants. Bostonians and Londoners still remembered their cities' history of conflagrations, and the crowds stoked their fellow citizens' fears by setting bonfires. Even King George III used fire symbolism in 1781 to express his continued concern. After watching the Gordon Riots and seeing Britain's continued military problems in America, he worried that now, more than ever, the figurative fire in America had to be put out. He worried that if the rebellions in some provinces or colonies could not be suppressed, other areas surely would follow, and "the fire might be smothered to break out again on the first occasion."[166]

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[164] John Thaxter to Abigail Adams, Paris 18th. June 1780, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 3: 368.
[165] Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, c. 1714-80: A Political and Social Study*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 236-237.
[166] The King to Lord North, March 3, 1781, quoted in Mary A. M. Marks, *England and America, 1763-1783: The History of a Reaction*, (London: Brown, Langham, & Co. Ltd., 1907), 882.

Crowds coming from all sorts of ideologies and backgrounds have relied on fire during protests, which was the source of the king's anxiety. The crowds in the Gordon Riots seemed to use fire predominantly to initiate specific attacks on places of political and religious power. Leaders designed these attacks to release prisoners and destroy buildings, and to express the crowd's anger. Thomas Holcroft bemoaned that "[i]t is hardly possible to collect, in one point of view, the havock of this night; had half the mischief the Mob had threatened been effected, nothing less than national bankruptcy and destruction could have ensued."[167] The crowds engaging in Boston's crowd activities never went so far as to threaten the town with complete destruction, and never demolished so much property over the course of a single riot.[168] The "relative mildness" of the American crowd made it distinctive; it never went "beyond its own limited goals," compared to similar crowds in France and Britain. The British crowds eventually transitioned to the more "American" style of protest, as evidenced by behavior during the Gordon Riots. But as Lloyd Rudolph argues, unlike the typical Boston crowd, "in the week of mayhem and destruction between June 2 and June 8, 1780, the London mob overran its objectives, was responsible for the destruction of lives and property on a large scale and repudiated its leadership." Despite differences in the two crowds' breadth, the Gordon Riots help illustrate the international impact of Americans' fire usage.[169]

Historian Robert Brink Shoemaker, after examining crowd action in London throughout the eighteenth century, argues that even in the years before the Gordon Riots, "Londoners' propensity to take to the streets was in decline, as both elites and ordinary people became concerned about the extent of violence and disorder, and developed other means of expressing

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[167]Holcroft, *A Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late*, 33.
[168] Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England*, 228-236.
[169] Lloyd I. Rudolph, "The Eighteenth-Century Mob in America and Europe," *American Quarterly*, 11, 4 (Winter, 1959), 453.

their grievances." He goes further, citing qualitative evidence, that the "nature of crowd protest changed significantly in the second half of the eighteenth century, making it more difficult for rioters to project the appearance of public support for their point of view. Riots which took place towards the end of the century were more violent, involved greater use of weapons, and were subject to greater repression by the authorities." Crowds still assembled after 1780, but soldiers controlled them more effectively than in previous years, and the crowds seemed to have less support among their fellow city dwellers. The soldiers successfully limited the spontaneity of crowd gatherings by constantly monitoring the streets, and prevented others from joining any gathering assemblies. Politicians also worked to distance themselves from crowd actions, and community leaders learned of alternative ways to express their discontent. These methods included the development of voluntary societies, which increased significantly after 1780. Shoemaker argues that "bonfires, effigy burning, and flags and cockades were rarely used to assemble crowds after the Gordon Riots."[170]

American protests also changed during this time, and Massachusetts leaders, like their British counterparts, continued working to prevent crowd actions from arising. Samuel Adams, despite his penchant for crowd activity during the 1760s, now called for harsher punishments for those engaging in insurrections. He and others wanted not only to punish the rioters, but to dissuade others from similar behavior. "In monarchies," he declared, "the crime of treason and rebellion may admit of being pardoned or lightly punished; but the man who dares to rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death."[171] Adams worried that crowd actions would unravel the new republic, and saw each new action by the Regulators as an act of treason. As

[170] Robert Brink Shoemaker, *The London Mob: Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century England*, (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 142-143, 147-149.
[171] William V. Wells, *The Life and Public Service of Samuel Adams*, 3 vol., (1865; reprinted, Freeport, New York: Book for Libraries Press, 1969), 3: 246; William Pencak, "Samuel Adams and Shays's Rebellion," *New England Quarterly* (March 1989), 64-66.

William Pencak argues, Adams viewed the crowds much as government supporters had during the Revolution, ascribing the disorder to "designing men" who organized the crowd action. In 1784, he thought that the new government provided more effective means of addressing unrest, thereby rendering crowd action improper: "County Conventions and popular committees served an excellent purpose when they were first in practice. No one therefore needs to regret the share he may then have had in them. But…as we now have constitutional and regular governments and all our men in authority depend upon the annual and free elections of the people, we are safe without them. To say the least, they are becoming useless." Adams did not see any contradictions in his antithetical views of crowds, since he felt that there was no longer a place for crowd action in the new republic.[172]

As a result, Adams and other politicians crafted new legislation to combat crowd action. The Riot Act, passed by the Massachusetts General Court on October 28, 1786, took precautions to limit crowd activity. The Act defined a dangerous group as any gathering of more than twelve armed people, assembling "unlawfully, routously, riotously, or tumultuously." The Court ordered that officials read a proclamation to a gathering crowd encouraging them to cease their rioting. If the group did not disperse within one hour, then "it shall be lawful for every such officer to command sufficient aid, and he shall seize such persons."[173] Additionally, "if any of the persons assembled as aforesaid shall appear armed: And if any such person or persons shall be killed or wounded, by reason of his or their resisting the persons endeavoring to disperse or seize them, the said Justice, Sheriff, Deputy-Sheriff, Constable and their Assistants, shall be indemnified and

[172] Samuel Adams to Noah Webster, 30 April 1784, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry A. Cushing, 4 vols., (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904-1908), 4:305.

[173] The British government had a similarly structured Riot Act, and in fact, read it as the crowds of the Gordon Riots swelled. The crowd did not disperse as requested, and Lord Mansfield believed that their disobedience resulted from "a misconception of the Riot Act." See J. Paul de Castro, *The Gordon Riots*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 82, 206, 208.

held guiltless." Punishment for rioters included prison time, whipping every three months during their imprisonment, and the forfeiture of their land and chattel to the Commonwealth. Pulling down buildings resulted in the same penalties as other forms of rioting. The Court stipulated that someone would read the Act multiple times per year, particularly "at the opening of every Court of General Sessions of the Peace…and at the anniversary meeting of each town, within this Commonwealth."[174] Revolutionary America began to change and become more orderly, and there was to be little tolerance for crowd action in this new organization.

[174] "An Act to prevent Routs, Riots, and tumultuous Assemblies, and the evil Consequences thereof," *Acts and laws, passed by the General Court of Massachusetts*, (Boston: Adams and Norse, 1786), 503-504.

EPILOGUE
The Legacy of Fire

The need for crowd action eventually ceased in Boston and began to move to the Massachusetts countryside. Some rural crowds started to perceive problems with the new state government. Shays' Rebellion in 1786 provided Massachusetts and American government officials with a chance to control an uprising. As leaders discussed the problems and possible solutions, they reverted back to using fire symbolism; however, they presented this symbolism in an exclusively negative light. That is, crowd leaders were called "incendiaries," but there was no mention of fire as a positive icon. Military leaders also continually saw conspiracies working behind the crowd's actions, reverting to such thoughts in order to understand why Americans would rebel against a government created by and for them. Revolutionary fire imagery proved extremely useful to those trying to articulate the rebellion's threat to the Union.

Major General Benjamin Lincoln wrote to George Washington in 1787 with a detailed account of the rebellion after he defeated the Regulators, discussing how he had wanted to destroy the "little knots of those in arms which were collected in various parts of the Counties." He reported that there were "many parties in the neighboring States lurking near the borders of this. They are poisoning the minds of a class among them. It is now time for those States to exert themselves in apprehending such characters, for they fan the coals, and will kindle the flame of rebellion whereever [sic] they go."[175] Washington also feared that the rebellion could spread to other counties and states, and made use of similar symbolism when describing events in Massachusetts. "Fire," he wrote to David Stuart in December 1786, "where there is inflammable

[175] From Benjamin Lincoln, *The Papers of George Washington: Confederation Series*, W.W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig, ed., (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia, 1995), 4: 430.

matter, very rarely stops; and nothing is more certain than that."[176] He told Henry Knox a few weeks later that "there are combustibles in every State, which a spark may set fire to."[177] Washington also fretted that this rebellion would provide Britain with an opportunity to stir western Indians against the Americans, "sowing the Seeds of jealousy & discontent" among them. He feared Britain would "improve every opportunity to foment the spirit of turbulence within the bowels of the United States, with a view of distracting our governments, & promoting divisions." Not only could the rebellion spread like fire, but America's enemies could take advantage of the unrest. Both Lincoln and Washington relied on fire imagery to describe this "evil" rebellion, and identified the possibility that Shays' Rebellion would inspire a conspiracy to destroy the Union.[178]

Many Americans had conflicting views of crowd action, and were unsure if the rebellion signified a widespread problem. Despite his anxiety, Washington found himself confused by various accounts and news stories of the rebellion, since "at one time these insurgents are represented as a mere Mob—At other times as systematic in all their proceedings. If the first, I would fain hope that like other Mobs, it will, however formidable, be of short duration." If the crowd actions were, in fact, systematic in nature, Washington feared that "there surely are men of consequence and abilities behind the Curtain, who move the puppits. The designs of whom may be deep & dangerous."[179] These men could come from within the state, or provide an external threat to the nation. Conspiracy theories continued to plague leaders, and as they came to terms with the Rebellion and eventually ended it, leaders relied on symbolism established during the Revolution to articulate those fears.

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[176] Washington to David Stuart, 6th Decr 1786, ibid., 4: 446.
[177] Washington to Henry Knox, 26th Decr 1786, ibid., 4: 482.
[178] Ibid., 4: 483.
[179] To David Humphreys, Decr 26th 1786. Ibid., 4: 478.

Despite the dual nature of fire as both a natural force furthering the spirit of liberty and as an uncontrollable force of destruction, government and military leaders relied on fire symbolism only to label the Regulators as unnatural and dangerous. Especially as contrasted with the new, legitimate government, the Regulators needed to be cast in terms unlike those of the revolutionaries so the rebels could not legitimize their movement or easily encourage others to join their ranks. Even more so, American leaders needed to separate Shays' Rebellion from instances such as the Gordon Riots in order to preserve the authority of the new government. Leaders of the Gordon Riots seemed to get their inspiration from the Americans, and enacted one of their deadliest crowd actions at a time when America, specifically urban America, was trying to move away from such activity. In order to separate the Rebellion, however, leaders had to employ fire symbolism in the same way that government supporters had done several years before. Their perspective of crowd action had changed. Shays' Rebellion was the first opportunity for American leaders to act on the anti-crowd rhetoric they included in such documents as the Massachusetts State Constitution. The Rebellion highlighted the new American distrust of crowd action; this was one of the state's last notable instances where specifically revolutionary rhetoric helped define people's fear of crowds and eventually helped defeat the multitude. People relied on such symbolism from time to time after Shays' Rebellion, but never so frequently.

While Americans limited incendiary and crowd behavior in the town of Boston after the war, from time to time, crowds still emerged. Starting in the 1770s, though, crowds' use of fire dwindled and fire symbolism appeared less frequently. For years people hearkened back to Boston's revolutionary movements through positive fire symbolism, but images such as the "flame of liberty," the idea of patriotism spreading like fire, or the ability to spark a blaze within

Americans' souls did not appear nearly as frequently in reference to contemporary events. Daniel Shays and other leaders, in their written protests to the government, never referred to their own internal fires, and based on available documentation, did not use any fire references to stir their fellow countrymen.[180] In a limited capacity, Americans still relied on negative fire imagery, particularly when describing perceived threats to the stability of the new government. In fact, the number of references started quickly declining. Bostonians no longer employed fire imagery as a positive reference, signifying how crowds changed form and started to terrify new government leaders and their supporters. Shays' Rebellion helps illustrate Americans' changing conceptions regarding the effective uses of crowds in political dissent, and how despite their altered tactics, revolutionary rhetoric decreased but never dissipated. As the nation approached the 1800s, the fire seemed to have burnt out in Boston.

But public memory of revolutionary activities did not. In the years before the Civil War, citizens engaging in crowd action invoked images of revolutionary riots and demonstrations. They burned buildings and effigies, and publicly displaying their frustrations in the streets. These people harkened back to their patriotic predecessors, and praised "the noble and fearless example set for us" by members of Boston protests. Modern protests, however, do not typically make use of fire. Many popular movements throughout American history have claimed the Revolution as their own, justifying their actions based on their interpretations of revolutionary crowd actions. Popular memory of the Revolution fluctuated depending on the time period and the motivations of those trying to claim it. Americans are still able to individually interpret incendiary crowd actions. In recent years the Boston Tea Party has proven to be an iconic event for groups to rely on, but other Boston crowd actions, such as the Boston Massacre, provide equally useful fodder

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[180] For more on the Regulators' language, see Leonard L. Richards, *Shays's Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

for reclaiming one's American history; however, none of these contemporary groups mention fire, the unifying agent between crowds in Boston and in other colonies and the crowd's most effective tool.[181] Even since George Washington, in his first inaugural address, declared that the "sacred fire of liberty" had been preserved after the War of Independence and ordained by heaven, the fire has fizzled out. One modern radical group called "In God We Trust" refers directly to Washington's use of the phrase in their quest to preserve the government's religious traditions, but for the most part, the true "fire of liberty" disappeared from American rhetoric after the ratification of the United States Constitution.[182]

Although their physical fires have gone out, the colonists' incendiary language remains. Despite the fact that inflammatory crowd actions do not have as firm roots in American memory as other revolutionary events, the modern public occasionally mentions incendiary mobs, and even politicians and newscasters have used the term "incendiary language." Senator John McCain defended the use of such terms to refer to Republicans' rhetoric against Democrats, arguing that they are "just part of the political lexicon."[183] In modern language, a person can "get fired up," be "burned," or can "burn out." The continued use of fire symbolism to refer to individuals and groups of people may be one of the most widespread, though unacknowledged, legacies of the Revolution. Modern fire metaphors hearken back to the terms' original usage. Fire served an integral role in the fight for independence—it helped mobilize colonists and Britons against each other, and laid the fiery foundation for the American Revolution. Fire allowed colonists to spread ideas, unify groups of people across social and economic strata, and

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[181] David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861 toward Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America*, (Philadelphia: Oxford University Press, 1970), 98; Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution*, (Boston: Beacon Press: 1981), 180-207.
[182] "Sacred Fire of Liberty," In God We Trust: Keeping Faith in America, <http://www.ingodwetrustusa.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=43&Itemid=73>
[183] NBC Today Show, "Reform, Repeal, Reload," March 25, 2010.

strike fear in the hearts of their enemies. Fire also made conspiracy theories that much more terrifying, and provided a tangible emblem of colonial fear, paranoia, and dissatisfaction with the British government. The revolutionary spirit of crowds continued to affect civilian and government interactions following the War of Independence, and the crowd's use of fire survives as a symbol of American ingenuity and the power of the common people.

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