

CHAPTER 4

DOCUMENT SET 2

The People's Rebellion: Popular Protest and Revolutionary Potential

The documents in Set 1 stressed ideology and principle, but there was another important decision to revolutionary ferment: the role played by the nonelite activists who supported the initiatives of popular party leaders. In recent years historians have explored not only the well-known activities of merchants and upper-class radicals but also the importance of the lower classes and urban mobs as the shock troops of the Revolution. The following documents provide a sample of mob action in the 1760s and the 1770s. As you weigh the evidence, try to assess the extent to which the lower-class rebels were autonomous and independent.

Your textbook's description of the Stamp Act riots clearly establishes the importance of mob violence in the successful resistance against the hated revenue measure. In his history of Massachusetts Bay, Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson described the impact that lower-class elements had on colonial stamp agents. Examine his remarks for evidence of the mob's apparent goals and the connection between the popular party and enforcement groups such as the Sons of Liberty. Compare Hutchinson's account with printer John Holt's description of the Sons' activities in New York colony. Note the extent to which the urban crowds acted independently.

Several documents contain clues to the social and economic makeup of the patriot organizations. Review the Charleston, South Carolina, Sons of Liberty membership list with an eye to its class composition. Com-

pare the Charleston data with evidence from the other documents to determine what social groups dominated the Sons' activities. How did such organizations interact with mob leaders?

The next two documents deal with the controversial events surrounding the Boston Massacre. As you review the conflicting accounts provided by the *Boston Gazette* and Captain Thomas Preston, arrive at your own conclusion about responsibility for the violence that occurred. Explain the differences in interpretation, especially the disagreement over the spontaneity of the clash. What was the significance of autonomous crowd behavior in provoking the incident?

The mob actions described in this document set raised an important question for colonial elite groups. Examine Gouverneur Morris's reaction to the events of the period 1765–1774 in light of other evidence of popular activism found in the remaining documents. Account for the fears of the aristocratic Morris as you reflect on the democratic implications of lower-class initiative.

In assessing the importance of popular participation and crowd activity, consider the process of mob formation and explain the appearance of mobs on the political scene. Think about the reasons for the authorities' failure to quell the violence and assess the meaning of mob action for the future. Finally, be aware of the link between urban violence during the Revolution and the purposes of elite group patriots.

Questions for Analysis

- ✓ 1. What do the documents reveal about the extent of popular involvement in revolutionary activity? What was the significance of crowd action in the pursuit of radical goals? How were urban crowds mobilized for political action? What evidence do the documents contain of purposeful mob action? Relate your response to the broader issue of the crowd's role in history.
- ✓ 2. What was the social and economic composition of the Sons of Liberty? What was the significance of such organizations in the movement toward rebellion? How did they relate to the urban crowds?
- ✓ 3. Compare your textbook's description of the Boston Massacre with the two divergent accounts in the documents. What is your interpretation of the events that led to violence? What do the documents suggest about the spontaneity of the mob's behavior? Use evidence from the documents to support your position.
4. What were the social implications of the popular activities described in the documents? What were the concerns of elite group commentators on pre-Revolutionary violence? How do these actions by the urban masses contribute to an analysis of the nature of the Revolution? What was the relationship between internal social conflicts and external political relations?

5. "The lower classes played an independent and autonomous role in the pre-Revolutionary action that led to a break with England. They were not the tools of other groups, but rather pursued their own libertarian objectives." Do you agree or disagree? Support your argument with evidence drawn from the documents.

1. Thomas Hutchinson Recounts the Mob Reaction to the Stamp Act in Boston, 1765

The distributor of stamps for the colony of Connecticut arrived in Boston from London; and, having been agent for that colony, and in other respects of a very reputable character, received from many gentlemen of the town such civilities as were due to him. When he set out for Connecticut, Mr. Oliver, the distributor for Massachusetts Bay, accompanied him out of town. This occasioned murmuring among the people, and an inflammatory piece in the next Boston Gazette. A few days after, early in the morning, a stuffed image was hung upon a tree, called the great tree of the south part of Boston [subsequently called Liberty Tree]. Labels affixed denoted it to be designed for the distributor of stamps. . . .

Before night, the image was taken down, and carried through the townhouse, in the chamber whereof the governor and council were sitting. Forty or fifty tradesmen, decently dressed, preceded; and some thousands of the mob followed down King street to Oliver's dock, near which Mr. Oliver had lately erected a building, which, it was conjectured, he designed for a stamp office. This was laid flat to the ground in a few minutes. From thence the mob proceeded for Fort Hill, but Mr. Oliver's house being in the way, they endeavoured to force themselves into it, and being opposed, broke the windows, beat down the doors, entered, and destroyed part of his furniture, and continued in riot until midnight, before they separated. . . .

Several of the council gave it as their opinion, Mr. Oliver being present, that the people, not only of the town of Boston, but of the country in general, would never submit to the execution of the stamp act, let the consequence of an opposition to it be what it would. It was also reported, that the people of Connecticut had threatened to hang their distributor on the first tree after he entered the colony; and that, to avoid it, he had turned aside to Rhode-Island.

Despairing of protection, and finding his family in terror and great distress, Mr. Oliver came to a sudden resolution to resign his office before another night

The next evening, the mob surrounded the house of the lieutenant-governor and chief justice [Hutchinson]. He was at Mr. Oliver's house when it was assaulted, and had excited the sheriff, and the colonel of the regiment, to attempt to suppress the mob. A report was soon spread, that he was a favourer of the stamp act, and had encouraged it by letters to the ministry. Upon notice of the approach of the people, he caused the doors and windows to be barred; and remained in the house. . . .

Certain depositions had been taken, many months before these transactions, by order of the governor, concerning the illicit trade carrying on; and one of them, made by the judge of the admiralty, at the special desire of the governor, had been sworn to before the lieutenant-governor, as chief justice. They had been shewn, at one of the offices in England, to a person who arrived in Boston just at this time, and he had acquainted several merchants, whose names were in some of the depositions as smugglers, with the contents. This brought, though without reason, the resentment of the merchants against the persons who, by their office, were obliged to administer the oaths, as well as against the officers of the customs and admiralty, who had made the depositions; and the leaders of the mob contrived a riot, which, after some small efforts against such officers, was to spend its principal force upon the lieutenant-governor. And, in the evening of the 26th of August, such a mob was collected in King street, drawn there by a bonfire, and well supplied with strong drink. After some annoyance to the house of the registrar of the admiralty, and somewhat greater to that of the comptroller of the customs, whose cellars they plundered of the wine and spirits in them, they came, with intoxicated rage, upon the house of the lieutenant-governor. The doors were immediately split to pieces with broad axes, and a way made there, and at the windows, for the entry of the mob; which poured in, and filled, in an instant, every room in the house.

The lieutenant-governor had very short notice of the approach of the mob. He directed his children,

and the rest of his family, to leave the house immediately, determining to keep possession himself. His eldest daughter, after going a little way from the house, returned, and refused to quit it, unless her father would do the like.

This caused him to depart from his resolutions, a few minutes before the mob entered. They continued their possession until day-light; destroyed, carried away, or cast into the street, every thing that was in the house; demolished every part of it, except the walls, as far as lay in their power; and had begun to break away the brickwork.

The damage was estimated at about twenty-five hundred pounds sterling, without any regard to a great collection of publick as well as private papers, in the possession and custody of the lieutenant-governor.

The town was, the whole night, under the awe of this mob; many of the magistrates, with the field officers of the militia, standing by as spectators; and no body daring to oppose, or contradict.

2. John Holt's Account of the Stamp Act Riots in New York, 1765

The Matter was intended to be done privately, but it got wind, and by ten o Clock I suppose 2000 people attended at the Coffee House, among them most of the principal men in Town—The Culprits apologies did not satisfy the people, they were highly blamed and the Sons of Liberty found it necessary to use their Influence to moderate the Resentments of the People. Two Men were dispatch'd to the Collector for the Stamp'd Bonds of which he had 30 in all, he desired Liberty to confer with the Governor, which was granted. The Governor sent Word, if the Stamps were deliver'd to him, he would give his Word and Honour they should not be used; but that if the people were not satisfied with this, they might do as they pleased with them—The message being returned to the gathering Multitude, they would not agree to the Governors Proposal, but insisted upon the Stamps being deliver'd and burnt, one or two men attended by about a thousand others were then sent for the Stamps, which were brought to the Coffee House,

and the Merchant who had used them was order'd himself to kindle the Fire and consume them, those filled in and all, this was accordingly done amidst the Huzza's of the people who were by this Time swell'd to the Number I suppose of about 5000, and in another hour I suppose would have been 10,000—The people pretty quietly dispersed soon After, but their Resentment was not allay'd, Toward the Evening . . . tho' the Sons of Liberty exerted themselves to the utmost, they could not prevent the gathering of the Multitude, who went to Mr. Williams's house, broke open the Door and destroyed some of the Furniture . . .

The people were generally satisfied and soon dispersed—but many of those of inferior Sort, who delight in mischief merely for its own sake, or for plunder, seem yet to be in such a turbulent Disposition that the two mortified Gentlemen are still in some Danger, but the Sons of Liberty intend to Exert themselves in their Defense.

3. William Shepherd Attempts to Collect Customs Duties in Philadelphia, 1769

Having obtained the inspector general's leave of absence for the recovery of my health, I returned here on the 13th instant. I now in obedience to your commands signified to me when I had the honour to attend the board, do lay before your honours the fol-

lowing account of the disturbances which happened at Philadelphia, viz.

On Saturday 1st instant, about ten o'clock in the morning, a seizure was made by the collector in consequence of an order from the inspector general, of

and the rest of his family, to leave the house immediately, determining to keep possession himself. His eldest daughter, after going a little way from the house, returned, and refused to quit it, unless her father would do the like.

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lowing account of the disturbances which happened at Philadelphia, viz.

On Saturday 1st instant, about ten o'clock in the morning, a seizure was made by the collector in consequence of an order from the inspector general, of

near fifty pipes of Madeira wine, which was lodged in a store belonging to Mr. Andrew Hodge. . . . I waited upon the inspector general and acquainted him that I had great reason to suspect that it was the intention of some of the inhabitants to rescue the wines from the officers. He told me that he would take care to prevent it. I informed the collector of my not being able to get the key of the store, and with my apprehensions of the design of the inhabitants, and recommended the wines being removed as soon as possible. He told me that he had no stores to put them in and that if he had, it was not in his power to get it removed on account of the rain. The rain was over about four o'clock in the afternoon, when the collector went down to the store but was denied admittance therein by a man unknown who had armed himself with pistols, and swore that if he pretended to enter it he would blow his brains out, or words to that effect; upon which the collector retired and went to the chief justice and procured a writ of assistance, and a number of constables to assist him in the execution of his duty, and they returned to the store about five o'clock in the afternoon, but they were not able to afford him any help, the mob being so numerous. They ordered the constables off of the wharf, though I think they tarried there long enough to read the Riot Act or writ of assistance, but which I do not know. They likewise prevented the collector's executing his duty, obliging him to go away, swearing they would shoot him if he attempted it. They pelted him with stones, glass bottles, etc., one of which struck him in the lip and hurt it considerably. . . . [T]he lock which the collector put on the store was broke off by the mob, and the door forced open and all the wines therein taken out

and put on board three lighters or shallops and carried up the river. All the time they were transacting this matter they swore revenge and destruction against me, taking it for granted that I was the cause of making the seizure. . . . Some particular persons told me they thought it would be dangerous for me to venture out. The gentleman that I boarded with was advised not to let me tarry in his house; that if he did it would be in danger of being pulled down, but he kindly said that he would run the risque of it. I could not be persuaded that my person was in danger, and thought that if I appeared to be intimidated, the inhabitants would think it arose from a consciousness of guilt. I therefore went out as usual. I spent the evening out, taking care for fear I should be insulted, to put a pair of pistols in my pockets. Upon my return home about a quarter past ten o'clock, two men of a sudden came up to me, one of them without saying a word to me, struck me as hard as he could in the pit of my stomach, which immediately deprived me of breath and I fell down. He took the advantage of some weapon, I apprehend a knife, and slit my nose. . . . As I passed through the streets I was the object that everybody stared and gazed at. I at present think myself unable to persevere any longer at Philadelphia, for the trouble and abuse I meet with there appears to be impossible for me to encounter with, and yet my desires are so great to be continued and fixed in it, that notwithstanding their opposition, I can't think of quitting the field. Therefore if the honourable board should think it most for his Majesty's service to order me to return, I am determined to obey them, if the consequence should be the loss of my life, which I really apprehend may be the case. . . .

4. Charleston, South Carolina, Sons of Liberty, 1766

1. Christopher Gadsden, merchant.
2. William Johnson, blacksmith.
3. Joseph Veree, carpenter.
4. John Fullerton, carpenter.
5. James Brown, carpenter.
6. Nath[anie]l Libby, ship carpenter.
7. George Flagg, painter and glazier.
8. Tho[mas] Coleman, upholsterer.
9. John Hall, coachmaker.
10. W[illiam] Field, carver.
11. Robert Jones, sadler.
12. John Loughton, coachmaker.
13. "W." Rogers, wheelwright.
14. John Calvert, "Clerk in some office."

15. H[enry] Y. Bookless, wheelwright.
16. J. Barlow, sadler.
17. Tunis Teabout, blacksmith.
18. Peter Munclean, clerk.
19. W[illiam] Trusler, butcher.
20. Robert Howard, carpenter.
21. Alexander Alexander, schoolmaster.
22. Ed[ward] Weyman, clerk of St. Philip's Church, and glass grinder.
23. Tho[mas] Swarle, painter.
24. W[illiam] Loughton, tailor.
25. Daniel Cannon, carpenter.
26. Benjamin Hawes, painter.

5. The *Boston Gazette* Describes the Boston Massacre, 1770

... On the evening of Monday, being the fifth current, several soldiers of the 29th Regiment were seen parading the streets with their drawn cutlasses and bayonets, abusing and wounding numbers of the inhabitants.

A few minutes after nine o'clock four youths, named Edward Archbald, William Merchant, Francis Archbald, and John Leech, jun., came down Cornhill together, and separating at Doctor Loring's corner, the two former were passing the narrow alley leading to Murray's barrack in which was a soldier brandishing a broad sword of an uncommon size against the walls, out of which he struck fire plentifully. A person of mean countenance armed with a large cudgel bore him company. Edward Archbald admonished Mr. Merchant to take care of the sword, on which the soldier turned round and struck Archbald on the arm, then pushed at Merchant and pierced through his clothes inside the arm close to the armpit and grazed the skin. Merchant then struck the soldier with a short stick he had; and the other person ran to the barrack and brought with him two soldiers, one armed with a pair of tongs, the other with a shovel. He with the tongs pursued Archbald back through the alley, collared and laid him over the head with the tongs. The noise brought people together; and John Hicks, a young lad, coming up, knocked the soldier down but let him get up again; and more lads gathering, drove them back to the barrack where the boys stood some time as it were to keep them in. In less than a minute ten or twelve of them came out with drawn cutlasses, clubs, and bayonets and set upon the unarmed boys and young folk who stood them a little while but, finding the inequality of their equipment, dispersed. On hearing the noise, one Samuel Atwood came up to see what was the matter; and entering the alley from dock square, heard the latter part of the combat; and when the boys had dispersed he met the ten or twelve soldiers aforesaid rushing down the alley towards the square and asked them if they in-

tended to murder people? They answered Yes, by G-d, root and branch! With that one of them struck Mr. Atwood with a club which was repeated by another; and being unarmed, he turned to go off and received a wound on the left shoulder which reached the bone and gave him much pain. Retreating a few steps, Mr. Atwood met two officers and said, gentlemen, what is the matter? They answered, you'll see by and by. Immediately after, those heroes appeared in the square, asking where were the boogers? where were the cowards? But notwithstanding their fierceness to naked men, one of them advanced towards a youth who had a split of a raw stave in his hand and said, damn them, here is one of them. But the young man seeing a person near him with a drawn sword and good cane ready to support him, held up his stave in defiance; and they quietly passed by him up the little alley by Mr. Silsby's to King Street where they attacked single and unarmed persons till they raised much clamour, and then turned down Cornhill Street, insulting all they met in like manner and pursuing some to their very doors. Thirty or forty persons, mostly lads, being by this means gathered in King Street, Capt. Preston with a party of men with charged bayonets, came from the main guard to the commissioner's house, the soldiers pushing their bayonets, crying, make way! They took place by the custom house and, continuing to push to drive the people off, pricked some in several places, on which they were clamorous and, it is said, threw snow balls. On this, the Captain commanded them to fire; and more snow balls coming, he again said, damn you, fire, be the consequence what it will! One soldier then fired, and a townsman with a cudgel struck him over the hands with such force that he dropped his firelock; and, rushing forward, aimed a blow at the Captain's head which grazed his hat and fell pretty heavy upon his arm. However, the soldiers continued the fire successively till seven or eight or, as some say, eleven guns were discharged.

6. Captain Thomas Preston's Defense of Military Action in Boston, 1770

It is [a] matter of too great notoriety to need any proofs that the arrival of his Majesty's troops in Boston was extremely obnoxious to its inhabitants. . . .

On Monday night about 8 o'clock two soldiers

were attacked and beat. But the party of 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, as I was captain of the day, occasioned my repairing immediately to the main guard. In my way there I saw the people in great commotion, and heard them use the most cruel and horrid threats against the troops. In a few minutes after I reached the guard, about 100 people passed it and went towards the custom house where the king's money is lodged. They immediately surrounded the sentry posted there, and with clubs and other weapons threatened to execute their vengeance on him. I was soon informed by a townsman their intention was to carry off the soldier from his post and probably murder him. On which I desired him to return for further intelligence, and he soon came back and assured me he heard the mob declare they would murder him. This I feared might be a prelude to their plundering the king's chest. I immediately sent a non-commissioned officer and 12 men to protect both the sentry and the king's money, and very soon followed myself to prevent, if possible, all disorder, fearing lest the officer and soldiers, by the insults and provocations of the rioters, should be thrown off their guard and commit some rash act. They soon rushed through the people, and by charging their bayonets in half-circles, kept them at a little distance. Nay, so far was I from intending the death of any person that I suffered the troops to go to the spot where the unhappy affair took place without any loading in their pieces; nor did I ever give orders for loading them. This remiss conduct in me perhaps merits censure; yet it is evidence, resulting from the nature of things, which is the best and surest that can be offered, that my intention was not to act offensively, but the contrary part, and that not without compulsion. The mob still in-

creased and were more outrageous, striking their clubs or bludgeons one against another, and calling out, come on you rascals, you bloody backs, you lobster scoundrels, fire if you dare, G-d damn you, fire and be damned, we know you dare not, and much more such language was used. At this time I was between the soldiers and the mob, parleying with, and endeavouring all in my power to persuade them to retire peaceably, but to no purpose. They advanced to the points of the bayonets, struck some of them and even the muzzles of the pieces, and seemed to be endeavouring to close with the soldiers. On which some well behaved persons asked me if the guns were charged. I replied yes. They then asked me if I intended to order the men to fire. I answered no While I was thus speaking, one of the soldiers having received a severe blow with a stick, stepped a little on one side and instantly fired, on which turning to and asking him why he fired without orders, I was struck with a club on my arm, which for some time deprived me of the use of it, which blow had it been placed on my head, most probably would have destroyed me. On this a general attack was made on the men by a great number of heavy clubs and snowballs being thrown at them, by which all our lives were in imminent danger, some persons at the same time from behind calling out, damn your bloods—why don't you fire. Instantly three or four of the soldiers fired, one after another, and directly after three more in the same confusion and hurry. . . . On my asking the soldiers why they fired without orders, they said they heard the word fire and supposed it came from me. This might be the case as many of the mob called out fire, fire, but I assured the men that I gave no such order; that my words were, don't fire, stop your firing. In short, it was scarcely possible for the soldiers to know who said fire, or don't fire, or stop your firing. . . .

7. Gouverneur Morris Warns Against Democratic Revolution, 1774

. . . These sheep, simple as they are, cannot be gulled as heretofore. In short, there is no ruling them; and now, to leave the metaphor, the heads of the mobility [the mob] grow dangerous to the gentry, and how to keep them down is the question. While they correspond with the other colonies, call and dismiss popular assemblies, make resolves to bind the consciences

of the rest of mankind, bully poor printers, and exert with full force all their other tribunitial powers, it is impossible to curb them. . . .

I stood in the balcony, and on my right hand were ranged all the people of property, with some few poor dependents, and on the other all the tradesmen, etc., who thought it worth their while to leave daily labor

the good of the country. The spirit of the English constitution has yet a little influence left, and but a little. The remains of it, however, will give the wealthy people a superiority this time, but would they secure it they must banish all schoolmasters and confine all knowledge to themselves. This cannot be. The mob begin to think and to reason. Poor reptiles! it is with them a vernal morning; they are struggling to cast off their winter's slough, they bask in the sunshine, and ere noon they will bite, depend upon it.

Chapter 4: Document Set 2 References

1. Thomas Hutchinson Recounts the Mob Reaction to the Stamp Act in Boston, 1765.
Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1764–1828), ed. Lawrence Shaw Mayo, III (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), Vol. 3, pp. 86–88.
2. John Holt's Account of the Stamp Act Riots in New York, 1765.
"John Holt to Mrs. Deborah Franklin," February 15, 1766, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. I. Minis Hays (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1908), Vol. 48, p. 92.
3. William Shepherd Attempts to Collect Customs Duties in Philadelphia, 1769.
"William Shepherd to Boston Commissioners of Customs," April 1, 1769, Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections* (Boston, 1806–), 4th Series, Vol. 10, pp. 611–617.
4. Charleston, S.C., Sons of Liberty, 1766.
Charleston, S.C., Sons of Liberty, Membership List, 1766, Robert W. Gibbes, ed., *Documentary History of the American Revolution, South Carolina, 1764–1776* (New York: 1855), pp. 10–11.
5. The *Boston Gazette* Describes the Boston Massacre, 1770.
Boston Gazette and Country Journal, March 12, 1770.
6. Captain Thomas Preston's Defense of Military Action in Boston, 1770.
British Public Records Office, C.O. 5/759, in Merrill Jensen, ed., *English Historical Documents: American Colonial Documents to 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 750–752.
7. Gouverneur Morris Warns Against Democratic Revolution, 1774.
Gouverneur Morris to John Penn, May 20, 1774, *American Archives: Fourth Series Containing a Documentary History of the English Colonies in North America from the King's Message to Parliament of March 7, 1774 to the Declaration of Independence by the United States*, ed. Peter Force (Washington: 1837–1846), Vol. 1, pp. 342–343.

The gentry begin to fear this. Their committee will be appointed; they will deceive the people and again forfeit a share of their confidence. And if these instances of what with one side is policy, with the other perfidy, shall continue to increase and become more frequent, farewell aristocracy. I see, and I see it with fear and trembling, that if the disputes with Great Britain continue, we shall be under the worst of all possible dominions; we shall be under the domination of a riotous mob. . . .