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The Shoemaker and the Tea Party

Memory and the American Revolution

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George Robert Twelves Hewes

There was no shoemakers' society or general society of mechanics. Shoemakers had a long tradition of taking ad hoc collective action, as did other Boston craftsmen, and Hewes may have participated in such occasional informal activities of the trade. Very likely he drilled in the militia with other artisans on Training Day (size would not have barred him). He seems to have known many artisans and recalled their names in describing events. So it is not hard to imagine him at a South End tavern enjoying a mug of flip with Adam Colson, leatherworker, or Patrick Carr, breechesmaker. Nor is it difficult to imagine him in the streets on November 5, in the South End Pope's Day company captained by McIntosh. After all, what else was there in respectable Boston for him to belong to? All this is conjecture, but it is clear that, though he lived in Boston proper, he was not part of proper Boston—not until the events of the Revolution.

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Between 1768 and 1775, the shoemaker became a citizen—an active participant in the events that led to the Revolution, an angry, assertive man who won recognition as a patriot. What explains the transformation? We have enough evidence to take stock of Hewes's role in three major events of the decade: the Massacre (1770), the Tea Party (1773), and the tarring and feathering of John Malcolm (1774).

Thatcher began the story of Hewes in the Revolution at the Stamp Act but based his account on other sources and even then claimed no more than that Hewes was a bystander at the famous effigy-hanging at the Liberty Tree, August 14, 1765, that launched Boston's protest. "The town's people left their work—and Hewes, his hammer among the rest—to swell the multitude." The only episode for which Thatcher seems to have drawn on Hewes's personal recollection was the celebration of the repeal of the act in May 1766, at which Hewes remembered drinking from the pipe of madeira that John Hancock set out on the Common. "Such a day has not been seen in Boston before or since," wrote Thatcher.

It is possible that Thatcher's bias against mobs led him to draw
The murder of Christopher Seider in February 1770 is depicted in this crude engraving on a broadside. The eleven-year-old boy who joined the picketing of the shop of importer T. Lilly lies dying, shot by a customs official from a second-story window. The boy’s mother looks on aghast. *Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania.*

a curtain over Hewes’s role. It is reasonable to suppose that if Hewes was a member of the South End Pope’s Day company, he followed McIntosh, who was a major leader of the crowd actions of August 14 and 26, the massive processions of the united North and South End companies on November 1 and 5, and the forced resignation of stampmaster Andrew Oliver in December. But it is not likely; in fact, he may well have been off on fishing voyages in 1765. Perhaps the proof is negative: when Hewes told Hawkes the story of his role in the Revolution, he began not at the Stamp Act but at the Massacre, five years later. On the night of the Mas-
sacre, March 5, Hewes was in the thick of the action. What he tells us about what brought him to King Street, what brought others there, and what he did during and after this tumultuous event gives us the perspective of a man in the street.

The presence of British troops in Boston beginning in the summer of 1768—four thousand soldiers in a town of fewer than sixteen thousand inhabitants—touched Hewes personally. Anecdotes about soldiers flowed from him. He had seen them march off the transports at Long Wharf; he had seen them every day occupying civilian buildings on Griffin’s Wharf near his shop. He knew how irritating it was to be challenged by British sentries after curfew (his solution was to offer a swig of rum from the bottle he carried).

More important, he was personally cheated by a soldier. Sergeant Mark Burk ordered shoes allegedly for Captain Thomas Preston, picked them up, but never paid for them. Hewes complained to Preston, who made good and suggested he bring a complaint. A military hearing ensued, at which Hewes testified. The soldier, to Hewes’s horror, was sentenced to three hundred fifty lashes. He “remarked to the court that if he had thought the fellow was to be punished so severely for such an offense, bad as he was, he would have said nothing about it.” And he saw others victimized by soldiers. He witnessed an incident in which a soldier sneaked up behind a woman, felled her with his fist, and “stripped her of her bonnet, cardinal muff and tippet.” He followed the man to his barracks, identified him (Hewes remembered him as Private Kilroy, who would appear later at the Massacre), and got him to give up the stolen goods, but decided this time not to press charges.1 Hewes was also keenly aware of grievances felt by the laboring men and youths who formed the bulk of the crowd—and the principal victims—at the Massacre. From Hawkes and Thatcher three causes can be pieced together.

First in time, and vividly recalled by Hewes, was the murder of eleven-year-old Christopher Seider on February 23, ten days before the Massacre. Seider was one of a large crowd of schoolboys and apprentices picketing the shop of Theophilus Lilly, a merchant violating the anti-import resolutions. Ebenezer Richardson, a paid customs informer, shot into the throng and killed Seider. Richardson would have been tarred and feathered, or worse, had not Whig leaders intervened to hustle him off to jail. At Seider’s funeral, only a week before the Massacre, five hundred boys marched two by two behind the coffin, followed by two thousand or more adults, “the largest [funeral] perhaps ever known in America,” Thomas Hutchinson thought.4

Second, Hewes emphasized the bitter fight two days before the Massacre between soldiers and workers at Gray’s ropewalk down the block from Hewes’s shop. Of-duty soldiers were allowed to moonlight, taking work from civilians. On Friday, March 3, when one of them asked for work at Gray’s, a battle ensued between a few score soldiers and ropewalk workers joined by others in the maritime trades. The soldiers were beaten and sought revenge. Consequently, in Thatcher’s words, “quite a number of soldiers, in a word, were determined to have a row on the night of the 6th.”5

Third, the precipitating events on the night of the Massacre, by Hewes’s account, were an attempt by a barber’s apprentice to collect an overdue bill from a British officer, the sentry’s abuse of the boy, and the subsequent harassment of the sentry by a small band of boys that led to the calling of the guard commanded by Captain Preston. Thatcher found this hard to swallow—“a dun
from a greasy barber's boy is rather an extraordinary explanation of the origin, or one of the occasions, of the massacre of the 5th of March"—but at the trial the lawyers did not. They battled over defining "boys" and over the age, size, and degree of aggressiveness of the numerous apprentices on the scene.6

Hewes viewed the civilians as essentially defensive. On the evening of the Massacre he appeared early on the scene at King Street, attracted by the clamor over the apprentice. "I was soon on the ground among them," he said, as if it were only natural that he should turn out in defense of fellow townsmen against what was assumed to be the danger of aggressive action by soldiers. He was not part of a conspiracy; neither was he there out of curiosity. He was unarmed, carrying neither club nor stave as some others did. He saw snow, ice, and "missiles" thrown at the soldiers. When the main guard rushed out in support of the sentry, Private Kilroy dealt: Hewes a blow on his shoulder with his gun. Preston ordered the townspeople to disperse. Hewes believed they had a legal basis to refuse: "they were in the king's highway, and had as good a right to be there" as Preston.7

The five men killed were all workingmen. Hewes claimed to know four: Samuel Gray, a ropewalk worker; Samuel Maverick, age seventeen, an apprentice to an ivory turner; Patrick Carr, an apprentice to a leather-breeches worker; and James Caldwell, second mate on a ship—all but Christopher Attucks. Caldwell, "who was shot in the back was standing by the side of Hewes, and the latter caught him in his arms as he fell," helped carry him to Dr. Thomas Young in Prison Lane, then ran to Caldwell's ship captain on Cold Lane.8

More than horror was burned into Hewes's memory. He remembered the political confrontation that followed the slaughter, when thousands of angry townsmen faced hundreds of British troops massed with ready rifles. "The people," Hewes recounted, "then immediately chose a committee to report to the governor the result of Captain Preston's conduct, and to demand of him satisfaction."9 Actually the "people" did not choose a committee "immediately." In the dark hours after the Massacre a self-appointed group of patriot leaders met with officials and forced Hutchinson to commit Preston and the soldiers to jail. Hewes was remembering the town meeting the next day, so huge that it had to adjourn from Faneuil Hall, the traditional meeting place that held only twelve hundred, to Old South Church, which had room for five to six thousand. This meeting approved a committee to wait on the officials and then adjourned, but met again the same day, received and voted down an offer to remove one regiment, then accepted another to remove two. This was one of the meetings at which property bars were let down.10

What Hewes did not recount, but what he had promptly put down in a deposition the next day, was how militant he was after the Massacre. At 1:00 A.M., like many other enraged Bostonians, he went home to arm himself. On his way back to the Town House with a cane he had a defiant exchange with Sergeant Chambers of the Twenty-Ninth Regiment and eight or nine soldiers, "all with very large clubs or cutlasses." A soldier, Dobson, "ask'd him how he far'd; he told him very badly to see his townsmen shot in such a manner, and asked him if he did not think it was a dreadful thing." Dobson swore "it was a fine thing" and "you shall see more of it." Chambers "seized and forced" the cane from Hewes, "saying I had no right to carry it. I told him I had as good a right to carry a cane as they had to carry clubs."11

The Massacre had stirred Hewes to political action. He was one of ninety-nine Bostonians who gave depositions for the prosecution that were published by the town in a pamphlet. Un-
doubtlessly, he marched in the great funeral procession for the victims that brought the city to a standstill. He attended the tempestuous trial of Ebenezer Richardson, Seider's slayer, which was linked politically with the Massacre. ("He remembers to this moment, even the precise words of the Judge's sentence," wrote Thatcher.) He seems to have attended the trial of the soldiers or Preston or both.

It was in this context that he remembered something for which there is no corroborating evidence, namely, testifying at Preston's trial on a crucial point. He told Hawkes:

When Preston, their captain, was tried, I was called as one of the witnesses, on the part of the government, and testified, that I believed it was the same man, Captain Preston, that ordered his soldiers to make ready, who also ordered them to fire. Mr. John Adams, former president of the United States, was advocate for the prisoners, and denied the fact, that Captain Preston gave orders to his men to fire; and on his cross examination of me asked whether my position was such, that I could see the captain's lips in motion when the order to fire was given; to which I answered, that I could not.

Perhaps so: Hewes's account is particular and precise, and there are many lacunae in the record of the trial (we have no verbatim transcript) that modern editors have assiduously assembled. Perhaps not: Hewes may have "remembered" his brother Shubael on the stand at the trial of the soldiers (although Shubael was a defense witness) or his uncle Robert testifying at Richardson's trial. Or he may have given pretrial testimony but not have been called to the stand.

In one sense, it does not matter. What he was remembering was that he had become involved. He turned out because of a sense of kinship with "his townsman" in danger; he stood his ground in
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Four years later, at the Tea Party on the night of December 16, 1773, Hewes the citizen "volunteered" and became the kind of leader for whom most historians have never found a place. The Tea Party, unlike the Massacre, was organized by the radical Whig leaders of Boston. They mapped the strategy, organized the public meetings, appointed the companies to guard the tea ships at Griffin's Wharf (among them Daniel Hewes, George's brother), and planned the official boarding parties. As in 1770, they converted the town meetings into meetings of "the whole body of the people," one of which Hutchinson found "consisted principally of the Lower ranks of the People & even Journeymen Tradesmen were brought in to increase the number & the Rabble were not excluded yet there were divers Gentlemen of Good Fortunes among them." 1

The boarding parties showed this same combination of "ranks." Hawkes wrote:

On my inquiring of Hewes if he knew who first proposed the project of destroying the tea, to prevent its being landed, he replied that he did not; neither did he know who or what number were to volunteer their services for that purpose. But from the significant

The recollection of Joshua Wyeth, a journeyman blacksmith, verified Hewes's story in explicit detail: "It was proposed that young men, not much known in town and not liable to be easily recognized should lead in the business." Wyeth believed that "most of the persons selected for the occasion were apprentices and journeymen, as was the case with myself, living with tory masters." Wyeth "had but a few hours warning of what was intended to be done." 2 Those in the officially designated parties, about thirty men better known, appeared in well-prepared Indian disguises. As nobodies, the volunteers—anywhere from fifty to one hundred men—could get away with hastily improvised disguises. Hewes said he got himself up as an Indian and daubed his "face and hands with coal dust in the shop of blacksmith." In the streets "I fell in with many who were dressed, equipped and painted as I was, and who fell in with me and marched in order to the place of our destination."

At Griffin's Wharf the volunteers were orderly, self-disciplined, and ready to accept leadership.

When we arrived at the wharf, there were three of our number who assumed an authority to direct our operations, to which we readily submitted. They divided us into three parties, for the purpose of boarding the three ships which contained the tea at the same time. The name of him who commanded the division to which I was assigned was Leonard Pitt [Lendell Pitts]. The names of the other commanders I never: knew. We were immediately ordered by the respective commanders to board all the ships at the same time, which we promptly obeyed.
But for Hewes there was something new: he was singled out of the rank and file and made an officer in the field.

The commander of the division to which I belonged, as soon as we were on board the ship, appointed me boatswain, and ordered me to go to the captain and demand of him the keys to the hatches and a dozen candles. I made the demand accordingly, and the captain promptly replied, and delivered the articles; but requested me at the same time to do no damage to the ship or rigging. We then were ordered by our commander to open the hatches, and take out all the chests of tea and throw them overboard, and we immediately proceeded to execute his orders; first cutting and splitting the chests with our tomahawks, so as thoroughly to expose them to the effects of the water. In about three hours from the time we went on board, we had thus broken and thrown overboard every tea chest to be found in the ship, while those in the other ships were disposing of the tea in the same way, at the same time. We were surrounded by British armed ships, but no attempt was made to resist us. We then quietly retired to our several places of residence, without having any conversation with each other, or taking any measures to discover who were our associates. 4

This was Hewes's story, via Hawkes. Thatcher, who knew a good deal more about the Tea Party from other sources, accepted it in its essentials as an accurate account. He also reported a new anecdote, which he treated with skepticism, namely, that Hewes worked alongside John Hancock throwing tea overboard. And he added that Hewes, "whose whistling talent was a matter of public notoriety, acted as a boatswain," that is, as the officer whose duty it was to summon men with a whistle. That Hewes was a leader is confirmed by the reminiscence of Thompson Maxwell, a teamster from a neighboring town who was making a delivery to Hancock the day of the event. Hancock asked him to go to Griffin's Wharf. "I went accordingly, joined the band under one Captain

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Hewes; we mounted the ships and made tea in a trice; this done I took my team and went home as any honest man should." 5 "Captain" Hewes—it was not impossible.

As the Tea Party ended, Hewes was stirred to further action on his own initiative, just as he had been in the hours after the Massacre. While the crews were throwing the tea overboard, a few other men tried to smuggle off some of the tea scattered on the decks. "One Captain O'Connor whom I well knew," said Hewes, "came on board for that purpose, and when he supposed he was not noticed, filled his pockets, and also the lining of his coat. But I had detected him, and gave information to the captain of what he was doing. We were ordered to take him into custody, and just as he was stepping from the vessel, I seized him by the skirt of his coat, and in attempting to pull him back, I tore it off." They scuffled. O'Connor recognized him and "threatened to complain to the Governor. 'You had better make your will first,' quoth Hewes, doubting his fist expressively," and O'Connor escaped, running the gauntlet of the crowd on the wharf. "The next day we nailed the skirt of his coat, which I had pulled off, to the whipping post in Charlestown, the place of his residence, with a label upon it," to shame O'Connor by "popular indignation." 6
In Boston, the process of controlling the memory of the Revolution began even as the events were taking place, indeed, almost before they were over. The tea action, unlike those events the leaders of the Sons of Liberty neither willed nor controlled and those they lost control over, was in their hands from beginning to end. Yet shaping public memory of the event presented a challenge they were unable to meet.

To grasp the situation we must return to the principal Whig problem of the era: the “mob.” The Tory interpretation of the popular side of the Revolution—“the people were like the Mobility of all countries, perfect Machines, wound up by any Hand who might first take the Winch”—epitomized in the history written by the arch Loyalist Peter Oliver, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the colony in exile in England, was a caricature of the reality in Boston. In the long decade of conflict leading up to the break with Britain, as the Whig leadership around Samuel Adams—men for the most part of the “middling” sort—confronted the British establishment, its Loyalist allies, and a divided merchant community, they struggled to control the popular movement. Such admonitions as “No violence or you’ll hurt the cause” and “No mobs, no confusions, no tumults” in the patriot press can be taken as their motto for the decade. By 1775 they had established a coalition that included all but a minority of the merchant class.¹

In the eighteenth century, long before the imperial crisis, Boston had a tradition of crowd action and a reputation as a “mobbish” town. Crowd action was often “quasi-institutional,” as the historian Pauline Maier has put it: crowds used “extralegal means to implement official demands” or to “enforce laws otherwise not enforceable” or “to extend the law in urgent situations beyond its technical limits.” Crowds of laboring people also acted in their own interests, most strikingly against impressment, dragnet sweeps of the port to press men into the much hated British navy. In the Knowles Riot of 1747, rioters held the city for three days to force the return of impressed dockside workers. Over the decades, however, elites developed a pattern of disavowing mobs not of their own making, claiming that they were composed, as in the Knowles Riot, of “Foreign Seaman, Servants, Negroes, and other persons of mean and vile condition.”²

In the 1740s one mob became an institution in Boston. On Pope’s Day, November 5 (in England, Guy Fawkes Day), the city was taken over for the day and night by apprentices, journeymen, young people of all sorts, seamen, and sometimes blacks to celebrate their holiday. During the day, children begged for money, and rival companies from North End and South End neighborhoods paraded giant effigies of the devil prompting the Pope in turn prompting the Stuart Pretender to the throne; at night, they engaged in bone-breaking battles to capture and burn each other’s effigies. Minister and magistrate tolerated the festival as an expression of a political Protestant anti-Popery but could do no more than regulate its “excesses.”³
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In their resistance to British policies, Whig leaders were preoccupied with harnessing, mobilizing, or suppressing the energies of the crowd. What they could not fully manage in the making, they attempted to control in the commemoration. Reaction to the Stamp Act set the pattern. Resistance in 1765–66 was built on the scaffolding, symbolism, and leadership of the Pope's Day companies in collaboration with the leader of the Sons of Liberty. The rival companies coalesced, Ebenezer McIntosh, a shoemaker and leader of the South End company, became the leader of the united group whose officers were outfitted, wined, and dined by John Hancock and other patriot merchants. From 1765 until 1773, Pope's Day was tamed, the gang warfare channeled into unified patriotic processions against detested British symbols.

To protest the Stamp Act there were five major actions in 1765, two in August, two in November, and one in December. The first, on August 14, was organized by the leadership to intimidate Andrew Oliver, the Stamp Act commissioner designate, by hanging effigies on what became the Liberty Tree, holding a formal procession, pulling down Oliver's office, damaging his house, and making personal threats against him. The second, on August 26, in which a crowd gutted the house of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, likely rose out of “private resentments” but all the same delighted a wide range of Boston patriots. Then, on November 1, the day the Stamp Act was to go into effect, McIntosh, “sensible & manly” who “dressed genteelly,” as Judge Oliver told the story, “paraded the Town with a Mob of 2000 men in two files. If a whisper was heard among his followers, the holding up of his finger hushed it in a moment.” On November 5, the united companies marched again, and on December 17, McIntosh escorted Andrew Oliver to the Liberty Tree to force another resign-

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nation. McIntosh was dubbed “Captain General of the Liberty Tree.”

The Sons of Liberty were highly selective. They claimed August 14, disavowed August 26, and ignored November 1, November 5, and December 17, thus setting a pattern of dissociating themselves from what, either through their own making or that of others, was politically embarrassing. From 1766 to 1769, they commemorated August 14 at a elaborate subscription dinner attended by several hundred men who traveled out to a suburb in chaises and carriages, while suppressing the memory of “the detestable” August 26. McIntosh, feared by some as a possible “Marsaniello,” the leader of a seventeenth-century proletarian rebellion in Naples, was shunted aside, replaced as crowd leader by Dr. Thomas Young and William Molineux, who were members of the Whig inner circle.

There was no single “mob” and “no single pattern” to Boston’s crowd actions, as Dirk Hoerder’s analysis has established. At one pole were crowd actions organized by Whig leaders in their campaign to boycott those merchants who violated agreements not to import British goods. The Whig pattern is recognizable through written records: a town meeting, public notices warning the targets to desist, articles in the papers, a formal delegation or committee, and recognizable leaders, all an effort to clothe the action in legitimacy. At the other pole were tarring-and-feathering crowds, lower class and led from within, and usually organized on the spur of the moment against a target of opportunity, which in Boston invariably meant customs officers or informers against whom the laboring classes had their own grievances.

Whig leaders were quick to memorialize self-initiated street actions that got out of hand as well as actions they did not initiate
that yet served their purposes. An example of the first was the picketing of T. Lilly’s shop by boys in February 1770, which turned sour when a customs official shot into the crowd, killing eleven-year-old Christopher Seider. Whig leaders organized a funeral procession of five hundred boys and two thousand men and women for Seider “the marty”z.” The famous example of the second is the confrontation of townspeople with British troops several weeks later, on March 5. Whig leaders were engaged in a campaign to remove the troops, but the clash on March 5 was a chaotic event not willed by any party, the result of friction between troops and townspeople, especially the laboring classes. Angry citizens confronted angry soldiers. After soldiers shot into the crowd, Whig leaders arrived to cool down the enraged populace and take over negotiations with British officials. The next day they led the town meeting protest to remove the troops, then organized a second massive funeral procession for the victims, five young workers, in which fifteen thousand people marched through the streets.6

The memory of the event of March 5—complex, experienced from multiple vantage points, producing multiple memories—was immediately politicized. To patriots it was “The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated on King Street,” the title of Paul Revere’s lurid engraving, out within the week: British soldiers, on the command of Captain Thomas Preston, mercilessly shooting down defenseless, passive civilians whose clothing suggested that they were drawn from the respectable classes. To the British it was “the riot on King street,” a plot hatched by patriot leaders. To John Adams and Josiah Quincy, conservative patriot lawyers acting as defense attorneys for Preston and the soldiers in the trials, the townspeople were the aggressors and the soldiers acted in self-defense. In characterizing the crowd as “a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and molotices, Irish teagues, and outlandish jack tarrs”—all outsiders to the body politic—Adams continued the patriot pattern of dissociation, thereby establishing that proper Bostonians were law abiding. Bostonians then, and later, oscillated between these two constructs of events.7

Whig leaders now swallowed up one commemoration with another. Every March 5 from 1771 through 1775, the town sponsored an overflowing meeting at Old South meetinghouse, at which orators perpetuated the memory of the Massacre as proof of the danger of standing armies. The Massacre oration replaced the commemoration of the Stamp Act protest and was intended to replace Pope’s Day.8

Whig leaders were able to appropriate the public memory of events in part because there were no rival groups strong enough to sustain alternative memories. Whigs dominated the town meeting and the newspapers, and they had the support of the clergy in the dissenting churches. Even with their own newspaper and the support of the Anglican clergy, Loyalists were no match for them and went into exile after 1776.9 In all the political actions of the decade, “mechanics” were indispensable, both the “respectable mechanics and tradesmen” of the “middling” sort, as master artisans liked to call themselves, and the apprentices, journeymen, and artisans of the “inferior” sort (like Hewes), unskilled laborers, and seamen, all lumped together by “the better sort” as “the lower sort.” The Sons of Liberty leaders were dependent on masters as qualified voters in the town meeting, as members of their caucuses, and as stabilizing elements in crowd actions. Paul Revere, a prosperous silversmith, was recognized not only for his talents as an engraver in the patriot cause but also as a trusted leader in the North End, the heart of the maritime trades. But in Boston, masters did no: organize a Committee of Me-
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Mechanics, as did their counterparts in New York City, or write broadsides to "The Tradesmen, Mechanics and Manufacturers" on the right of "leather aprons" to run for public office, as in Philadelphia. The Adams leadership, by treating mechanics with a condescending respect, frustrated the growth of self-consciousness and self-organization. As a result, they failed to develop institutions that might perpetuate their own memories of the era.10

Comfortable with masters, the Whig leaders were on edge among the "lower sort." They shouldered McIntosh aside, replacing him with their own "mob" leaders. In 1774, as an instrument of crowd control, they created, "Captain Joyce, Jun.," the chairman of a fictitious Committee on Tarring and Feathering, and eventually banned Pope's Day. They were more comfortable seeing the laboring classes as "victims" who could be canonized as passive martyrs to British aggression, than as aggressive opponents of troops and customs officers who had a tendency to express their class resentments in attacks on the houses, and other symbols of wealth, of upper-class Loyalists.11

The forms of opposition popularized during the era—effigy burning, tarring and feathering, massive processions, Liberty Trees and Liberty Poles—would survive without recognition in official memory or print culture, passed on by oral tradition in the personal memories of ordinary people, to emerge in the popular protest of later generations. The events themselves—political, complex, many sided—would require the support of other means to sustain public memory.

The Destruction of the Tea, 1773

The action against the tea occurred sui generis and presented extraordinary problems to its leaders in both the doing and the remembering. It had its beginnings in late October 1773, gained momentum in two massive meetings in late November, and reached a climax in meetings on December 14 and 16, the second of which ended with the destruction of the tea. This event was unique in ways that later generations have not always been willing to recognize.1

It was the largest mass action of the decade. Attendance at these meetings of "the whole body of the people," at which the property qualifications of official town meetings were abandoned, easily reached five thousand. The final meeting at Old South, attended by many supporters from the surrounding towns and overflowing into the streets, was the largest Boston had ever seen. The numbers involved in direct action at Griffin's Wharf were relatively small, perhaps thirty to fifty men in the designated boarding parties (the invited), joined by volunteers who had been forewarned like Hewes (the semi-invited) and young men swept up in the excitement of the day (the self-invited), in all, around one hundred fifty men. Given the size of the three vessels, it is
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hard to envision many more than that. The spectators, from one
to two thousand people, stood silently on the docks during the
three-hour action. The leaders’ achievement was to mobilize the
entire spectrum of social classes for the meetings as well as the
master mechanics, journeymen, and apprentices who predominated
in the boarding parties. The support of the traditional
Pope’s Day constituency was all the more remarkable because on
November 5, 1773, the customary warfare between the North End
and South End, pent up since the truce of 1765, had broken out in
full fury. Ebenezer McIntosh, the acknowledged unity leader in
limbo since 1766, could boast about the tea party years later that
“it’s my chickens that did the job.”

It was a quasi-military action, the boldest and most dangerous in
Boston up to that time. The first “body” meetings authorized mili-
tary action: an armed watch on Griffin’s Wharf to prevent the tea
from being landed. When Samuel Adams told the meeting he
had armed himself, townspeople followed suit; there was not a
pistol to be bought anywhere in town. The boarding parties
risked arrest and prosecution. The leaders stayed behind in Old
South to give themselves what today would be called “plausible
deniability.” The “invited” took a pledge of secrecy. All partici-
pants risked life and limb. Several British naval vessels, marines
aboard, rode in the harbor, and more troops were stationed at
Castle William on one of the harbor islands. No one knew
whether Governor Hutchinson would ask for troops. As it turned
out, he was unwilling to risk it, lest it produce a bloodbath. The
crowd on the wharf thus served as insurance against military in-
tervention. But the boarding parties had to work in tense circum-
stances and at high speed; the period of grace for clearing custom
expired at midnight on December 16, and the owners would be

required by law to land the tea. The parties began at about six in
the evening and finished the job in about three hours.

All in all, the tea action was the most revolutionary act of the decade
in Boston. Leaders came close to articulating in public the classi-
cal Lockean justification for revolution. The meetings of “the
whole body of the people” were palpably illegal. Thomas Young,
Samuel Adams’s lieutenant, said he had “read in Judge Black-
stone that when the Laws and Constitution do not give the sub-
ject redress in any Grievance, that then he is in a state of nature
and he declared that they (the People assembled) were in such a
state—in such a state (he added) as were the Commonality of
England at Runny Mead under King John when Magna Charta
was first framed.”

Young was a radical by any usage of the term and later one of
the shapers of Pennsylvania’s democratic constitution. Yet con-
servative, lawyer John Adams went through the same political
reasoning to justify civil disobedience as the last resort after all
other remedies have been exhausted. The question was “whether
the Destruction of the Tea was necessary” and his answer was
that “it was absolutely and indispensably so.” Why? “They could
not send it [the tea] back” because the Governor and other offi-
cials “would not suffer it.” But “to let it be landed would be giving
up the principle of Taxation by Parliamentary Authority against
which the Continent have struggled for 10 years.” And so he was
beside himself the morning after the event. “This is the most
magnificent Moment of all,” he wrote in his diary. “There is a
Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity, in this effort of the Patriots that
I greatly admire. The People should never rise, without doing
something to be remembered—something notable and striking.
This destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid
and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences, and so lasting, that I can’t but consider it as an Epoch in History.”

The tea action was the most carnivalesque event of the era. Planned, deliberate, controlled, the action was also a wild reversal of the traditional order. Mockery suffused the major events of the decade. Pope’s Day, with its grotesque effigies, was nothing if not wild parody. The first demonstration against the Stamp Act was a mock hanging and a mock funeral procession. At the Liberty Tree the organizers also halted every farmer’s cart coming into town, mock “stamping” everything in sight, street theater worthy of a Marx brothers movie. Tarring and feathering, in which the crowd ceremoniously carted the accused to the gallows, mocked the legal system. But the action against the tea ships—destroying £9,659 of private property belonging to the powerful East India Tea Company, defying Parliament, defying the whole array of British officials and military might in the colony—this was truly turning the world upside down.

The action was carnivalesque in two respects. First, it was a mock enactment of the making of tea. The cry in Old South, “Boston harbor a teapot tonight,” set the tone. The spirit of the day and night, after two weeks of suspense, was one of festive euphoria. After the boarding party had left the church, Dr. Young, to hold the crowd, was “very merry (the people often shouting and clapping him)” making a ridiculous speech on “the ill effects of tea on the [physical] constitution,” as if they were destroying something dangerous to personal health. At the wharf, Joshua Wyeth, a journeyman blacksmith, said, “We were merry in an undertone at the very idea of making so large a cup of tea for the fishes.”

To “make tea” in Boston harbor mocked the genteel tea ritual. Tea, as Mercy Otis Warren wrote, was “an article used by all ranks in America,” but among the “better sort” the conduct of brewing, pouring, and serving tea was an elaborate, mannered class ritual managed by women. Among the well-to-do, it required the elegant silver teapots, creamers, and sugar bowls crafted by silversmiths like Revere, the tea caddies, serving trays, and tea tables made by skilled woodworkers, and the porcelain cups, saucers, and serving dishes imported from abroad. For the boarding parties—all but a minority of them men able to wield block and tackle and lift and break open 350-pound chests—to “make tea” in Boston harbor was a parody of class and gender. And for those among them who had broken into homes in 1765 destroying mirrors, glass windows, wine cellars, and fancy furniture, or who had gutted Hutchinson’s house, this was another way to channel class resentments.

The second element of the carnivalesque was the participants’ Indian persona. An Indian war whoop at Old South signaled the exodus of one party for the wharf. They were “Mohawks.” The minority with advance notice (the invited) donned Indian disguises; the majority (the semi-invited and the self-invited) did little more than blacken their faces with soot like Hewes, to improvise a disguise. But the minority set the Indian ambience.

“Playing Indian”—the historian Philip Deloria’s apt phrase for a game that began earlier and has continued throughout American history—in this case performed several important functions. First, disguise protected the minority of recognizable participants from detection and possible arrest. Second, the Indian was intended to be a terrifying symbol. Anne Hulton, the sister of a customs commissioner, testified that she had been “frequently alarmed with the Sons of Liberty surrounding her house with the most hideous howling of the Indians, when they attack an enemy.” Third, wearing a disguise gave the players a sense of license
to do what they might otherwise have been too inhibited to do. It was a masquerade that released them from the usual norms. Fourth, for the leaders "behind the curtain," identifying the actors as Indians shifted responsibility for the action to unknown outsiders, the sameploy leaders had used to blame every politically embarrassing action since 1765 on "boys, Negroes, seamen or strangers," all outside the formal body politic. Of course, no one on either side really believed they were Indians. The British Admiral Montagu, watching the event on shore, called it the "Indian caper." It was a case of "implausible deniability." 6

Bostonians played this wink and nod kind of joke for a few more months. A boarding party of sixty men disguised as Indians destroyed a cargo of tea on another arriving ship. The newspapers ran a mock exchange between the King of the Narragansetts and his followers; one of the guards at Griffin’s Wharf was inspired to write a mock proclamation attributed to another chieftain. In 1774 Paul Revere used the Indian as an emblem in at least three engravings. For the cover of an almanac, for example, he copied a British caricature in which a British minister with a copy of the Boston Port Bill in his pocket forces tea down the throat of a half-naked Indian woman, while another minister peers lecherously up her skirts. For a moment, the Indian became the political personification of the country, and "playing Indian" may well have been one way in which colonial Anglo-American Bostonians assumed an American identity. 7

Boston’s tea action caught the popular imagination all over the colonies. Songs and verses glorifying it appeared in Boston, Philadelphia, northern New England, and elsewhere. 8 Comparable actions in other ports enabled others to grasp the event. More important, tea, as Timothy Breen has demonstrated, "was perhaps the major article in the development of an eighteenth-century consumer society, a beverage which appeared on the tables of the wealthiest merchants and the poorest laborers." In 1774 colonists spoke of tea as a "badge of slavery" and sought "to purge their communities of tea leaves." In many villages "the inhabitants publicly burned their tea," which gave them a sense of kinship with Boston. 9

For Bostonians there were many reasons the tea action should be imprinted in personal memory. Men in almost every patriot family had taken part in the event, either attending the "body" meetings, watching the action on the wharf, or joining the boarding parties. Many were young and at an age when such emotional events would have been very meaningful. Women who had become politicized during the tea boycott and the massive funeral processions of 1770 egged their menfolk into action. Moreover, whether or not an individual was actually present, it was the kind of dramatic moment that was easy to grasp and remember. Boston was a port town in which everyone knew the business of ships; moreover, there were no two ways about what happened as there were, for example, with the Massacre. It was an electrifying event people remembered in later years by locating themselves in relation to it. Psychologists now call this "flashbulb" memory, and the reminiscences that surfaced forty and fifty years later would support this. Indeed, it was the kind of mythic event father and mother would pass on to son and daughter, grandparents to grandchildren, and artisan to fellow artisan during a drink break or in the neighborhood tavern. 10

Yet there were factors working against public memory of the tea action. The "invited" in the boarding parties were sworn to secrecy; others knew that "mum’s the word." Years later, John Adams said he did not know who was involved and never asked; he expected indictments. People feared prosecution, it seems, even
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after the American victory. The first printed reminiscences by participants surfaced only in the 1820s, and the first list of those involved only in 1835, when Thatcher published one in the appendix to his biography of Hewes. None of the leaders left an “inside” account of this or any other major event; ambivalent about their role as conspirators, they put little down in writing or, like Samuel Adams, were said to have burned their papers. The tea party songs did not last, probably because they had none of the irreverent mockery that made “Yankee Doodle” popular for generations.¹¹

There were also political reasons for playing down the event. The patriot movement did not commemorate the tea action or turn December 16 into a sacred day to match March 5, and it never depicted the action in engravings (until the 1830s, the only pictures were British or European). Why not? One reason is that the tea action was devastating in its impact, in effect, precipitating the British retaliation that led to the Revolution. The action itself was rapidly overtaken by the crush of events that followed and within sixteen months led to war: the closing of the port of Boston, the British occupying army, the city an armed camp and then under siege, the mass exodus of patriots, amid widespread privation. Thus, in one sense, the patriot leaders never had a chance to celebrate the tea action; in another, they did not want to: it was to blame for a lot of suffering. Moreover, it simply did not fit the posture Massachusetts patriots assumed as the war began. According to their narrative, the British were the aggressors, and the colonists simply the defenders of their own liberties. This was the visual trope of the patriot cause in Revere’s engraving of the massacre as in Amos Doolittle’s engraving of the Battle of Lexington soon after 1775, where a British officer is ordering troops to mow down dispersing militia who are not returning fire. This was the

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literal image a New England militia man, James Pike, engraved on his powderhorn in 1776: “Regulars Attacking, Provincial Defending,” a Liberty Tree in between, and he was not the only one to do so. There was no way to portray the tea action to fit this image.¹²

The tea action was carried out only after all other remedies had been exhausted, but it was unmistakably willful and provocative, a true act of revolution. Although disciplined and focused (one crew member even swept the deck after they were done), it was also an exhilarating reversal—aggressive, quasi-military, destructive, and carnivalesque. There is no puzzle about why it should stay in private memory. But is it any wonder that it presented a problem for the keepers of public memory?
Notes to Pages 32–38


5. The Masacre

1. Thatcher, Memoir of Hewes, 68, 71. For crowd events in Boston the most reliable guide is Dirk Hoeder, Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765–1776 (New York, 1977). Hoeder has generously shared with me his detailed knowledge.

2. Thatcher, Memoir of Hewes, 84–87. Bostonians were “shocked by the frequency and severity of corporal punishment in the army” (John Shy, Toward Lexington: The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution [Princeton, N.J., 1965], 308).


4. Hawkes, Retrospect, 45; Thatcher, Memoir of Hewes, 88–95. Hewes told about the event after he recounted the Masacre. He correctly remembered Seider, reported as “Snider” by Thomas Hutchinson and other contemporaries. His recollection is borne out in essentials by Hoeder, Crowd Action, 216–23. See Hutchinson to Thomas Hood, Feb. 23, 1770; to Gen. Gage, Feb. 25, 1770; and to Lord Hillsborough, Feb. 28, 1770, Hutchinson Transcripts, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.


11. Deposition No. 75, in A Short Narrative of the Horrid Masacre in Boston . . . To Which is Added an Appendix . . . (Boston, 1770), 61. Thatcher reprinted this in Memoir of Hewes, 125–128. Hewes’s deposition testified to the soldiers’ threats to kill more civilians and to someone entering the Custom House at the time of the Masacre, both themes emphasized by Whig leaders.

12. Thatcher, Memoir of Hewes, 95. Thatcher did not give the words. I suspect that what Hewes remembered was the verdict brought in by the jury after a dramatic trial repeatedly interrupted by what Peter Oliver called “a vast concourse of rabble.” The verdict was “Guilty of Murder,” at which “the Court Room resounded with Expressions of Pleasure” (Oliver’s Origin & Progress, ed. Adair and Schutz, 86). The judges delayed the sentence until the Crown granted a pardon. The case aroused a furor. See Wroth and Zobel, eds., Legal Papers of Adams, vol. 2, 396–430, and Zobel, Boston Masacre, chap. 15, and 423–426. For the way in which the killing of Seider and the killings of the Boston Masacre were linked politically, see A Monumental Inscription in the Fifth of March Together with a few Lines on the Enlargement of Ebenezer Richardson Convicted of Murder [1772], broadside, Mass. Hist. Soc.

13. Hawkes, Retrospect, 35. Thatcher does not even mention this claim of Hewes, possibly because he was skeptical.

14. Wroth and Zobel, eds., Legal Papers of Adams, vol. 3, has no record of Hewes at the trial, but see L. H. Butterfield’s “Descriptive List of Sources and Documents”: “This operation has been a good deal like that of an archeological team reconstructing a temple from a tumbled mass of architectural members, some missing, many mutilated, and most of them strewn over a wide area” (ibid., 34). For Shubael Hewes see ibid., 176–77, 234–75, and for Robert Hewes ibid., vol. 2, 405–418.

Notes to Pages 38–43

6. The Tea Party

1. Hutchinson to Lord Dartmouth, Dec. 3, 1773, Hutchinson Transcripts. For Daniel Hewes see Francis S. Drake, Tea Leaves: Being a Collection of Letters and Documents Relating to the Shipment of Tea . . . (Boston, 1884), XVI.

2. Hawkes, Retrospect, 36–37. Hewes’s account is verified in its essentials by Hoeder, Crowd Action, 357–64, and is not inconsistent with the less
7. Tar and Feathers

1. Mass. Gaz. and Boston Wly News-Letter, Jan. 27, Feb. 5, 1774. Hewes told this story to Hawkes essentially as reported in this paper but with only some of the dialogue. He may have kept the clipping. Thatcher added dialogue based on the account in the paper but also extracted additional details from Hewes not in either the Gazette or Hawkes.


6. Hawkes, Retrospect, 44; Zobel, Boston Massacre, 102.


10. Thatcher, Memoir of Hewes, 132.

11. Ibid., 133.

8. The Patriot

1. Thatcher, Memoir of Hewes, 18; 263; Oliver's Origin & Progress, ed. Adair and Schutz, 74–75.


3. Hawkes, Retrospect, 42–44.

4. Ibid., 19–19.


6. Robert Hewes attended the 1769 dinner commemorating the Stamp Act action of 1765 (see "An Alphabetical List of the Sons of Liberty who Dined at Liberty Tree, Dorchester, August 14, 1769," MS, Mass. Hist. Soc.). "Parson Thatcher" called Robert "a great Liberty Man" in 1775 (see Thatcher, Memoir of Hewes, 151). Daniel Hewes was a guard at the tea ships, Nov 30, 1773 (see Draké, Tea Leaves, xlvi). For Shubael Hewes, who testified for the defense at the Massacre trial, see Putnam, comp., Joshua Hewes, 331.


8. "Jack Coblentz," Massachusetts Gazette (Boston), Feb. 20, 1776; "Crispin," Massachusetts Spy (Boston), Jan. 16, 1772. Lord Bute was the Earl of Bute, an advisor to King George III.


10. Edmund S. Morgan, "The Pueblo Ethic and the American Revolu-
trait was "among the best of his portraits." The dating of the portrait is confirmed by Mary Leen, Librarian, Bostonian Society (letter to the author, Aug. 16, 1977).


Part Two: When Did They Start Calling It the Boston Tea Party?


1. Taming the Revolution


4. Dirk Hoerder, Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765-1780 (New York, 1977), remains the most reliable guide to crowd events; Oliver, Origin and Progress; Anderson, "Ebenezer McIntosh.


2. The Destruction of the Tea


2. The first list to appear in print in Thatcher, Memoir of His (1835), had 56 names; by the time Drake published Tea Leaves (1884) there were 133 claimants. Claimants accepted by the Boston Tea Party Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution number 170. Scholars, using different lists and sources, have come up with roughly similar proportions of occupations and social classes. Hunt, in "The Crowd and the American Revolution," using a list of 102 and identifying 76 men, finds 17 boys and apprentices, 39 artisans, 4 town officials, and 16 merchants;
Hoerder, *Crowd Action*, working with a list of 123, and using the Boston Tax List of 1771, finds 14 out-of-towners, 16 apprentices, and only 34 who can be identified on the tax list. Of these 34, one-third held no property, one-third small property, one-sixth up to £200 and a further one-sixth over £300. George Quintal, Jr., Historian and Genealogist for the Arnold Expedition Historical Society [Colburn House, Arnold Rd., Pittston, Maine 04461], the most recent scholar to analyze the data, in a work in progress has identified additional claimants to produce a list of 208. Of 88 whose occupations he can identify, he tentatively finds 14 apprentices, 47 artisans, and 15 merchants. In addition he identifies 42 unskilled laborers, 2 maurers, 3 merchant's clerks, 1 in service trades, 5 farmers, and 7 professionals. Quintal is attempting to establish a scale of credibility to the claims for participation.


3. Taming the Memory of the Revolution, 1781–1820
