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**The New England People in their Towns on
December Sixteenth, 1773**
A Historic Mission at Risk

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION'S DEEP ROOTS

The American Revolution traces back to England on June 7, 1628, when a progressive bloc in the House of Commons forced Charles I to agree to the Petition of Right before they would assess taxes. The Petition of Right aimed to fix in the English constitution four basic rights of Englishmen, echoing the Magna Carta of 1215: to be taxed only by authority of the people's representatives, to be arrested, arraigned and tried only by due process, to be free of a standing army, which always oppresses the people, and to be free of martial law.¹ The man who wrote the petition, Sir Edward Coke, was a steady promoter of the Puritan political cause, and his secretary, Roger Williams, would become an important founder of New England. In retrospect, they were defending the same basic rights that would be at stake in America in 1776. The New Englanders went to America to create local commonwealths of Calvinist individuals, who idealized those four basic rights. As Thomas Hutchinson put it, "arbitrary measures" by Charles I drove to New England those who honored "the Constitution" for "the sake of civil & Religious Liberty."² They lived under the authority of the town meeting, in parish autonomy free of the crown's bishops, under the legal rule of a rights-protective code and jury-based, moderate judicial practice, all defended by a citizen militia. For the founders and their descendants in New England, the whole body of rights comprised a "constitution," their moral and political order.³

On March 10, 1629, King Charles I and his guards rode through Westminster to the House of Lords and repudiated the Petition of Right by dissolving Parliament. He denounced the "vipers" in the Commons

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who had passed “The Three Resolutions,” in a momentous session on March 2, which implied that the king was “a capital enemy to this Kingdom and commonwealth.”⁴ In 1649, the Commons would try him as a traitor, execute him, and abolish the monarchy and the royalist “Cavalier”-dominated House of Lords. The direct heirs of that English Revolution were the “Mohawks” who destroyed the tea in Boston in 1773. The king-in-Parliament was trying to make the same innovations: exacting taxation without representation, threatening to try political dissenters without a jury of their peers, quartering a standing army on the citizenry, and enforcing martial law. And just as Charles I’s bishops waged war on nonconformity, George III’s bishops hoped to introduce Anglican episcopal sees in America.

A vanguard group of colonists founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony at Salem in 1628, and the rest of the Great Migration began pouring into the colony under the authority of a royal charter in 1630.⁵ Up to 20,000 immigrants founded independent communities and churches, drew up the Massachusetts Body of Liberties of 1641, and created an impressive culture of Judeo-Christian, legal, and classical education. The scale of their radicalism can be measured by the tragic zealotry into which they could descend: massacres of Indians, the hanging of glory-seeking Quaker missionaries, and the killing of supposed witches in 1692.⁶ More characteristic was their commitment to reform – to create wholesome, happy communities, in which the individual was free of distractions to work on a personal relationship with God. A few of the more dedicated colonists returned to England after 1640 to participate in the Revolution there, in which many perished bringing down the crown and Lords in 1649.⁷ A decade later, the Revolution became too radical for the tastes of English conservatives, and in 1660, part of the army overthrew the rebel government and restored the crown and aristocratic house of Parliament. It was a bargain by which the English limited the monarch, generally according to the guidelines of 1628. Charles II and James II agreed to the terms but continued to test their limits over the decades, until the Glorious Revolution in 1688–89. Unrepentant New Englanders grudgingly accepted the Restoration of 1660, and participated in the so-called “revolution” of 1689, but saw it ultimately as an inglorious triumph of force by an ambitious ruling class. Many remained deeply skeptical about royal power, aristocratic privilege, and the settlement of 1689. That was still true in 1763, even if the majority of New Englanders were now conventionally patriotic Britons, that is, Protestant, English-speaking, and free under England’s “constitution,” by contrast to the rest of the world.⁸

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In 1773, New England radicals were upholding the principles of 1628, whereas loyalists, like Charles I's Cavaliers, supported royalist prerogative. A new young king came to the throne in 1760, and, with his many paid supporters in Parliament, seemed determined to re-test the "constitutional" or popular limits on power. New Englanders finally stopped them by reasserting 1628's ideals, but against the will of many loyalists, who sided with a glorious monarchy, a well-spoken young king, and a glittering aristocracy. By some magic in Philadelphia, on July 4, 1776, rebel leaders in the other colonies overcame their suspicions of radical New England. They joined to overthrow George III and his would-be American ruling class, symbolically try and execute the king in the Declaration of Independence, and entrust power to thirteen commonwealths under thirteen constitutions and law codes, in which the supreme military power was the citizens' democratically governed local militia.⁹

THE POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF THE PURITAN
 MISSION: FROM MOSES TO CROMWELL

New Englanders consciously lived in a historical tradition of democratic agitation, mounted most recently by the Lollards from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, and the Commonwealth rebels of the seventeenth century. They looked back to the ancient Judaic times described in Exodus, and forward to judgment by their descendants, which gave them a highly charged ideology.¹⁰ Historically minded New Englanders were guided by the past to be progressives, determined to pass on to their descendants relations of power that were contractual, based on natural and sacred rights, an order legitimated by common consent, to set an example for the human race.¹¹ They were outwardly loyal to the crown in 1763, even jubilantly so in the year of the Treaty of Paris, and they felt a Protestant affinity with the English and other British in a Christian world overwhelmingly dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. Despite all that, loyalty remained contingent for the majority of New Englanders, who remembered the republican promise of 1649 and the potential for royal tyranny.¹² They knew, however vaguely in many cases, that history showed time and again that popular sovereignty had to overtrump kingly power, if there were to be rights and social order.

The Massachusetts founders had not fled from England as a persecuted minority with enthusiastic, separatist religious views, like the Pilgrims of Plymouth; nor had they sought to establish an independent "theocracy" cut off from the corrupt Mother Country.¹³ They set out voluntarily to

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create “a city on a hill” where there were no unconstitutional taxes, arbitrary justice, established church, or standing army – where crown power remained under a dark cloud of suspicion and little exercised directly in New England.¹⁴ They meant to create a true English nation and church in purified form, to set a standard for those back home to emulate. Their ministers prayed for the monarch on Sunday, and the crown could always veto any legislation coming out of any colonial legislature, but otherwise crown and Parliament were little in evidence in New England. Liberty was preserved by the virtuous politics of responsible citizens in their local governing institutions, not doled out by a monarch and ruling class.¹⁵ Of course, their history was also personal, proto-national, North American – stained crimson by war with Native Americans and the Catholic colonists in New France, seemingly agents of heathenism and popery. But above all, the universe of the Puritans, like that of their Lollard forbears, was historically structured by the Pentateuch, the Gospels, the Dialogues, and the antimonarchical Anglo-Saxon democratic *witanagemot*.¹⁶

To outsiders, the people of New England looked like they formed a Yankee tribe, known for being doctrinaire about their peculiar belief in predestination, and for cultural distinctions, like speaking with a whining accent, and for being sharp traders bent on getting the best of one.¹⁷ Outsiders also thought they were naturally rebellious. In truth, that was a caricature of a people with strenuous social values, a historicized ideology, and a boisterous public sphere. They were also inclusive. They tolerated an important minority of colonists who thought the founders’ belief system was too stringent or just wrong, but were glad to live in an orderly society. The founders even welcomed Jews. In Rhode Island just before the Tea Party, the radical Ezra Stiles welcomed warmly Sephardic missionary Rabbi Raphael Chaim Isaac Carigal. The New Englanders cared for and tried to rehabilitate French Catholics the British Army deported from Acadia in the 1750s. They would ordain a man of color as a minister long before that would happen anywhere else.¹⁸ If they were not yet modern, they were well on the way by their toleration of diversity.

Outsiders recognized Yankees by the way they looked, spoke, acted, and thought. *Culture* is defined here as the total tangible behaviors and symbolic actions that reflect and help sustain a social structure, and usually provide the site of struggle for power.¹⁹ In terms of historical causation, social historians think culture frames social reality as it changes, but does not change it. Cultural historians think culture is an independent variable, that it “possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions

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and institutions.”²⁰ By contrast, the social historian relegates culture to a derivative, functional role, and insists instead on the primacy of family, class, community, nation – the people, who produce constantly changing symbolic culture like religious beliefs or gender orthodoxy. People and their interests can be obscured from view by cultural ways, rituals, guises, genders. Yet one might have to yield something to the power of culture in the revolutionary situation – for history did lay deep in the memory of New Englanders, and history is the supreme cultural artifact in our minds.

History is the (very imperfect) record of temporal change as it is imprinted on consciousness, connected to a larger meaning at the boundary separating the rational from the mystical. As Terry Eagleton puts it: “Culture is itself the spirit of humanity individuating itself in specific works; and its discourse links the individual and the universal.”²¹ Thus, history enables a people to define what is right and wrong in critical moments, by their rational evaluation of cause and effect over time. In revolutionary New England, historical culture may have had the tensile strength to act as an independent, creative variable in 1773, one that provided a tonic for a band of rebels with diverse views and interests desperate for any sense of unity.

History mobilized an insecure rebel minority in New England in a way nothing else could, by cutting across social boundaries created by class, sex, and race.²² Nevertheless, history never made all New Englanders a tribe, that is, a people who prize cultural consensus over individuality. For their historical consciousness was based on the supreme individual in negotiable accord with neighborly restraints. They were not single-minded. They could not become a homogeneous tribe if only because power and culture were politically diffused throughout the region in 588 towns, with locally crafted codes, in 588 roughly egalitarian political systems.²³ Most towns supported Boston when the British invaded in 1774 because they had a shared history that put a high value on individual freedom – not because they were “the same” in some cultural sense. At bottom, holding up the whole system, the New Englanders had developed “a practice, right, obligation and duty” to exercise absolute freedom of speech (*parrhesia*) about authorities and institutions. To assert that right was the inherently subversive and risk-filled duty of the active citizen.²⁴ They were the same in that they upheld the Petition of Right, Magna Carta, the Sermon on the Mount, and ancient Greek polis or Anglo-Saxon witanagemot. Rights had arisen from struggles for power, not cultural alchemy.

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As the townspeople became the central arbiters of revolutionary ideology, their treatment of the loyalists demonstrated their historical engagement. The rebels' ability to denounce but tolerate loyalists' views even in a great crisis gave them confidence they were on the right side of history. If loyalists could not see the light of The Cause now, their children might later, so it was worthwhile to keep loyalists in the towns if only for the sake of their children's right to grow up free. That was history at its best, with roots in English populist politics and East Anglian values.

Danelaw Progeny: East Anglians as New Englanders

A solid core group of the region's founding families came from England's East Anglia, the old Danelaw, which includes the present-day political divisions of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Lincolnshire, and part of Bedfordshire. Vikings from Denmark had invaded and subdued the Anglo-Saxon locals in the ninth century (in 865) and in the tenth. Although the locals no longer spoke Danish in 1628, the special character of the region was still identifiable. Innovation and productivity on its arable land was high, and the region led the country in both of the key early capitalist activities of small shop-keeping and itinerant peddling.²⁵ Its towns were marked by cultural diversity, a high degree of commercial activity, steady population turnover, and evangelical religion – these were not feudal peasant villages. They fostered individual autonomy and class mobility in an atmosphere more fluid than in most Old World towns.²⁶ The Danes had been so successful they had established an imperium over the eastern half of England in the century before the Norman Conquest. The British nation outside East Anglia – the English speakers (Anglo-Saxons, and later, Normans) and Celtic speakers (Scots, Welsh, Cornish and Irish) – remained more traditionally minded and shared a strong anti-Danish sentiment lingering right into the eighteenth century. Hatred of the “Danish yoke” was one aspect of what Daniel Woolf has called a “national historical master-narrative” in early modern England.²⁷ That is, the supposed “Danish yoke” served as an early version of the liberty-versus-power discourse in England.

However, seventeenth-century East Anglia was not Danish anymore, and outsiders were simply jealous of its prosperous and well-ordered citizenry.²⁸ Those who detested the American Yankees as militant progressives, moral absolutists, and tireless bargainers still might blast them rhetorically as “Danes,” although it did not mean much now.²⁹ The East Anglians shared with the rest of the “true” English the common libertarian notion that they were descended from the liberty loving

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Anglo-Saxons of the sixth century – they were the heirs of “Gothic” freedom, which had been destroyed for both Anglo-Saxon and Dane by the Viking invaders from Normandy in 1066, who imposed William the Conqueror’s “Norman Yoke.”³⁰ Contemporary English people in 1773 knew something of all that, but were now hazy and skeptical about it – including the Norman yoke – for their living lore had New Englanders descending directly from the political revolutionaries of the 1640s and 50s.³¹

The Puritan Historical Legacy

The lineage from Lollard John Wycliffe of 1381 through Leveller John Lilburne of 1649 to Samuel Adams (“the last Puritan”) was unbroken in a leveling, antimonarchical spirit, even though self-censorship after 1660 silenced much of the radical literature of the 1650s in both England and New England.³² The New England “Roundhead” was steeped in a Judaic ideal of freedom engraved in the Book of Exodus, which informed their hostility to mental darkness, personal irresponsibility, and tyranny. He and she resisted any power that would interfere with the individual’s primary purpose: to find clear evidence of his or her salvation, an elusive quest because a jealous divinity would keep the truth a secret, to mock human pride. That was the sin epitomized by the Cavalier warrior’s beautiful long hair, explaining why the true Christian kept his hair short, his head “round” and plain.³³

That code was related to a group of principles concerning the civic responsibility of a person to uphold the “common good,” or commonwealth, and the corresponding “commonwealth” covenant to protect all members.³⁴ Everyone had a covenant with the community, and every community had its own contracts with the individual and God. At the epicenter of that belief system was the free individual, not the organic community.³⁵ The community must make possible high moral standards, provide the most efficient primary political and military unit, promote local economic prosperity by an interdependent network of households, provide essential social services like education, poor relief and judicial arbitration, but above all, give the individual a space to enjoy a close personal relationship with Jehovah, that is, to emulate Jesus and hope to find evidence that one was “justified.”³⁶ The orderly community was a means to an end, not an end in itself.³⁷

If many New Englanders were no longer strict Puritans in religion in 1776, Puritanism still shaped their common heritage.³⁸ In the eighteenth century, the New England Way easily slipped into harness with Lockean contractual theory, so that many individual churchgoers

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were “post-Puritan” by 1773, but the beliefs of their revered ancestors continued to saturate the atmosphere in sermons, civil rhetoric, newspapers, and the law.³⁹ Predestination had always been intellectually difficult and now seemed convoluted and irrelevant to some, but its central objective – to make the individual responsible for his or her own spiritual condition – lived on in the politics of personal independence.⁴⁰ That was true even if a few New Englanders were becoming Paineite Deists.⁴¹ New England was a tolerant haven for outright freethinking like theirs. Yet most people remained observant Congregationalists, however relaxed many became in the pleasure-loving eighteenth century. Their core belief that all individuals were equally likely predestined to everlasting Hell still led them to love one’s fellow creatures in a Hebraic camaraderie of the damned.

By 1773, the New Englanders had much modernized the law and judicial system. They made political participation so broad that about half of all adult men served in some leadership role during their lives and over half of all men could vote. They restricted gubernatorial power; made taxation fair; required public schooling; and minimized corruption. So far from being “puritanical,” they seem to have been remarkably tolerant even of habitual homosexual practice, if not cognizant or accepting of gay identity in the modern sense.⁴² As David D. Hall puts it, only in the New England colonies “was it possible to sustain a civil state with so limited a version of executive authority . . . over against the customary hierarchies of England’s aristocratic state church and civil society.”⁴³ Only the steely self-discipline incited by predestination’s nerve-wracking logic could sustain the moral redoubt the New Englanders created in the tumultuous, dark seventeenth century. Thus, the New England town “set the gold standard of radicalism” in the era of the English Revolution; nor was it a surprise that such an exacting theology would lose ground in the following century to secular Enlightenment thought and commodity comforts.⁴⁴

THE RELIGIOUS CRISIS

New Englanders enjoyed “more religious freedom than there was in England” or anywhere else in the world, except for Pennsylvania, precisely because they did not tolerate traditional religious authorities: bishops, presbyteries.⁴⁵ Still, their Puritanism was always embattled. The lack of “church” authority put the region at risk of slipping into anarchy. Total freedom from pope, bishop, priest, and presbytery meant coping with inevitable instability, for a crusading democratic spirit bubbled out

of Congregational (“Independent”) church polity, by which the church members, not the clergy, ruled. That spirit produced antinomian dissenters on the fringes like Quakers, who were an embarrassment to the colonists’ reputation abroad, but they did not destroy Quakerism.⁴⁶

The crown’s episcopal church finally abridged the absolute freedom of Congregationalist church polity in Massachusetts in 1692, when that colony had to accept the building of its first Anglican church. It attracted those who were drifting into Arminianism, the belief that free will rather than predestination determines salvation. In practice, it meant that the believer’s mere outward “Christian” behavior sufficed to please God, without the incessant, doubt-ridden or even wretched search of self to which every Calvinist was supposed to commit. In other words, a relaxed belief spread among elites that if one was nice, and abided mostly by the Ten Commandments, one would go to Heaven. That less exigent personal standard also implied a revival of the traditional priestly power to intervene for the sinner, in order to make the believer confident and happy rather than encourage him to live in anxiety about his soul.⁴⁷ Then the region faced terrible internal schism beginning in the 1730s, the “Great Awakening,” part of a general evangelical upheaval in Western Europe and American colonies between 1730 and 1770.⁴⁸

Most alarming to old-line New Englanders was the American campaign by missionaries of the Church of England from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which was active in all colonies. By the 1760s, many people of property embraced the crown’s church. One incentive was the convert’s hope of political preferment, since the crown required membership in the Church of England for any appointment in British service. Yet converts also knew that Anglican expansion represented a diffuse cultural war against the Congregational Way. For a worldly convert like Thomas Hutchinson, the more liturgical, less spiritually exigent Anglican worship was more congenial.⁴⁹ By 1773, the king’s church had made such remarkable progress that the English clergy began pushing for an Anglican bishop on-site in America.⁵⁰ Nobody was surprised when it became obvious there was a marked degree of overlap between Anglican faith and loyalism. The Church would fall with the crown in 1776, but in 1773 the orthodox Church seemed formidable.⁵¹

THE CRISIS OF THE TOWNS: SOCIETY IN NEW
 ENGLAND IN DECEMBER 1773

The New England population was substantial, about one quarter of the free population in the thirteen colonies. It grew 30 percent in the 1760s

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TABLE 1.1. *Population of New England,
 Including Vermont, in 1770*

Massachusetts	266,565
Connecticut	183,881
New Hampshire	62,396
Rhode Island	58,196
Vermont	10,000
Total	581,038

and continued to grow 23 percent more even during the war years of the 1770s (from 581,038 in 1770 to 712,800 in 1780 – see Table 1.1⁵²). The population's readily apparent traits were its youth, material comforts, and Atlantic connections. All lived, by law, in towns.

The towns all looked the same to outsiders because of their common history and basic infrastructure: the founders of most towns started with an independent Congregationalist religious covenant, a near democracy in the local domain, and a roughly equal distribution of land in the first generation, with plenty of commons in reserve.⁵³ Yet by 1773 there was a hierarchy among them, as Bruce Daniels has shown. In the 4 colonies, at the top were 6 primary urban communities, which were linked to 32 secondary ones, and those were linked to 550 tertiary towns. However, only 2 were first-class seaports – Boston and Newport.⁵⁴

A highly diversified economic life promoted stability.⁵⁵ The colonists had social and political values guided by the conviction that an individual's hard work, however dirty, was honorable rather than shameful, and that the independent freeman's informed vote was essential.⁵⁶ It was an ethos in which wealth was not evil or undesirable, but the good Christian regarded money with healthy suspicion for its corrupting potential. A majority of men possessed the traditional English forty-shilling freehold required for the right to vote, and funded the public interest willingly. They set and paid their own town, county, and provincial taxes to fund numerous public services.⁵⁷ All the towns were marked by democratic governments with regular turnover of office-holders, protection of natural resources, a relatively healthy climate in which they suffered less than other colonists from major epidemic diseases, enjoying high rates of fertility and longevity, and no large and dangerously alienated group who might threaten the social structure – except, at first, the rapidly collapsing, smallpox-ravaged population of Indians, which declined to about 10,000 by 1676.⁵⁸ There was a broad distribution of wealth, despite increasing