
Thinking Through the Past

A Critical Thinking Approach to U.S. History

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Chapter

4

Evaluating One Historian's Argument: The "Hidden Side" of the American Revolution

The documents in this chapter are a combination of primary and secondary sources. The chapter presents an essay on social unrest in the revolutionary period and then provides several primary sources that can be used to judge the validity of the essayist's view of the American Revolution.

Secondary Source

1. The Unknown American Revolution (2005), GARY B. NASH

Primary Sources

2. An Account of a Stamp Act Riot (1765)
3. A Mob Punishes Merchants (1766)
4. A Gentleman Comments on the Mob (1774)
5. Mecklenburg County Resolves (1775)
6. *The Alternative of Williamsburg* (1775), PHILIP DAWE
7. "A Dialogue between Orator Puff and Peter Easy" (1776)
8. Antislavery Petition of Massachusetts Free Blacks (1777)
9. Blacks Protest Taxation (1780)
10. Chief Thayendanegea Pledges His Loyalty (1776)
11. Correspondence between Abigail and John Adams (1776)
12. "On the Equality of the Sexes" (1790), JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY

Every year, Americans commemorate their nation's birth with fireworks. For some onlookers, exploding Fourth of July rockets are a reminder of the long and bloody war that actually won independence. Today, though, few Americans understand much about the American Revolution. More than two hundred years after the muskets fell silent, this conflict remains enshrouded in myth and misunderstanding.

One reason is the way the tale is often told. Many traditional accounts of the Revolution focus on the leaders in the struggle for independence. Rarely seen are the many other Americans of lesser rank who protested, revolted, fought, suffered, and sacrificed in this long conflict. In addition, even today, many popular accounts present the Revolution only as a struggle to win independence from Great Britain that had little if any impact on American society. In fact, all wars are unsettling to societies that fight them and the Revolution was no exception. It would be remarkable if it had been otherwise. After all, the supporters of independence had enlisted an idea with potentially explosive consequences for their own society: equality. As Thomas Jefferson well knew, proclaiming that "all men are created equal" was an effective argument against rule by a monarch. But it could also be a powerful stimulus for change in a society where the majority was not free and equal.

Independence Day celebrations do not cast much light on efforts to fashion a more egalitarian society during the Revolution. Yet these efforts were often accompanied by fireworks of their own. What conflicts within American society were elicited by the fight against British rule? To what extent was the rebellion against British authority in the colonies intertwined with, and even shaped by, protests against inequality within American society? Did these protests make the Revolution, in the words of one historian, a fight over "who should rule at home" as well as for "home rule"?¹ Answers to these questions promise to illuminate the "unknown" American Revolution: the struggles to make American society a more egalitarian and democratic society.

SETTING

If many Americans today are unaware that there might be another side to the American Revolution, historians themselves are partly to blame. Their accounts have not always acknowledged that the fight for independence from Great Britain might have been accompanied by battles over the exercise of power at home. That oversight can be partly explained by the dramatic nature of the conflict between Britain and the revolting colonists. To a large extent, though, it also reflects the historians' own times. Indeed, the American Revolution is an excellent example of the old adage that each generation writes its own history.

For a long time, patriot oratory drowned out rumbles of discontent in the histories of the fight for independence. In fact, through most of the nineteenth century, historians simply reiterated the claims of the Whigs—as those who opposed Britain called themselves—that the Revolution was a struggle to defend liberty against a tyrannical government. Writing in the patriotic afterglow of the War for Independence, the accounts of so-called nationalist historians pictured the enemy in terms that left little room to question the Whigs' cause—or the premise that victory itself ushered in a glorious age of liberty and equality. With America's liberation from a "venal" British government, historian George Bancroft asserted in the 1850s, the "knell of the ages of servitude was rung; those of equality and brotherhood were to come in." Bancroft and other nationalist historians simply found it inconceivable that Americans might also have fought among themselves to achieve "equality and brotherhood."²

Later historians would not. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as progressive reformers battled wealthy and powerful corporate interests in the name of the "people," historians such as Carl Becker and Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., sharply attacked the nationalist view of the Revolution. Rather than view the Revolution as a moral struggle between righteousness and treachery, these progressive historians characterized it primarily as a contest over property and power. In Becker's oft-quoted phrase, the Revolution was a battle to gain home rule and determine "who should rule at home." Whether in its causes or its consequences, these historians argued, the Revolution could not be considered apart from economic and social tensions within American society, in particular the struggle by the have-nots of colonial society against a dominant aristocracy.

In time, that view also came in for attack. In the decades after World War II, as Americans engaged in a global cold war against communism, so-called consensus historians denied the existence of deep social divisions in the American past. Progressive historians, they charged, had distorted the nature of the Revolution by viewing it through the lens of their own generation's social and economic battles. Writing in the postwar period, historians such as Daniel Boorstin and Edmund Morgan saw remarkably little social or economic conflict among those who struggled for independence. Instead, they emphasized how colonists from all social ranks rallied together to defend cherished rights.

A generation later, social upheaval had unraveled Americans' sense of Cold War unity. The turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s also helped to re-focus historians' attention on the social context of the Revolution. Since the 1960s, though, historians' views of the Revolution have demonstrated little unity. Some historians have concentrated on understanding the context and consequences of the revolutionaries' political ideas. One of the most influential, Gordon Wood, would argue that these ideas were truly radical because they led Americans to question rule by traditional elites and to create more democratic governments. Other historians, however, would point to the limits of change in revolutionary society. In the wake of the civil rights and women's movements, scholars who

turned their attention to non-elite groups often emphasized that the Revolution did not bring equality or liberty to all. More recently, some historians have taken a closer look at the actions of common people during the Revolution. Sometimes called neoprogressives, they have highlighted Revolutionary-era class conflict and efforts by ordinary people to create a more egalitarian society. In doing so, these historians have enhanced our understanding of the social and economic influences on Revolutionary leaders. Their work also provides a timely reminder that those who try to understand the fight for independence without also considering struggles over “rule at home” will not fully understand the American Revolution.

INVESTIGATION

Unlike the previous chapters, this one contains a historian's essay—a *secondary source*—as well as a set of primary documents. The secondary source discusses the relationship between the struggle for independence and Americans' “multiple agendas” for radically transforming their society. The primary sources shed light on the essay's argument about the need to broaden our conception of the Revolution beyond the Founding Fathers who led the struggle against Britain. Your challenge is to use these sources to evaluate the essay's conclusions regarding varied efforts of other people to mold their society along more egalitarian and democratic lines. Together, the secondary and primary sources will allow you to determine the various ways that Americans challenged traditional authority and ideas. In the end, you should be able to decide whether and how the American Revolution was a “people's revolution” and what differences that made. Your evaluation should address the following questions:

1. **According to Source 1, how does broadening the story to include non-elite people change our understanding of the American Revolution?** In what ways, according to this source, did these people seek to transform American society? How did their actions shape the crisis with Britain?
2. **What do the primary sources reveal about the desires of common people or outsiders to challenge the status quo—the prevailing ideas or existing state of affairs in American society?** Did their protests share any common themes or ideas?
3. **In what ways, if at all, did the protests of non-elite people make the Revolution radical?** What were the most important consequences of their protests?

To complete this assignment, first read Source 1 and determine its argument about the “true radicalism” of the Revolution. Then turn to the primary sources to see what additional evidence they provide about the efforts of outsiders and

non-elite Americans to change their society. When you are finished, you should be able to come to some conclusions about the extent to which the Revolution involved a struggle to remake American society along more democratic and egalitarian lines and was thus more than a struggle for independence from Britain.

SECONDARY SOURCE

1

In this source, historian Gary Nash argues that we must see beyond the “mythic” view of the Revolution that usually revolves around the leaders of the American colonies’ rebellion against Great Britain.

Doing so, Nash maintains, reveals its “radicalism.” In this selection, Nash points to the protests of various groups or individuals during the Revolutionary era. Their actions and ideas, he suggests, challenged in various ways traditional power arrangements and illustrate the way many Americans wanted to democratize their society in these years. As you read Nash’s account, note the way he links protests against British policies to an increasing willingness to challenge authority in general. In what ways did that attitude manifest itself in the Revolutionary era, according to Nash?

The Unknown American Revolution (2005)

GARY B. NASH

In this [study] the reader will find, I hope, an antidote for historical amnesia. To this day, the public remembers the Revolution mostly in its enshrined, mythic form. This is peculiar in a democratic society because the sacralized story of the founding fathers, the men of marble, mostly concerns the uppermost slice of American revolutionary society. That is what has lodged in our minds, and this is the fable that millions of people in other countries know about the American Revolution.

I ask readers to expand their conception of revolutionary American society and to consider the multiple agendas—the stuff of ideas, dreams, and aspirations—that sprang from its highly diverse and fragmented character. It is not hard today to understand that American people in all their diversity entertain a variety of ideas about what they want their nation to be and what sort of America they want for their children. Much the same was true

Source: Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking, 2005), pp. xvi–xvii, 44–45, 46–49, 59, 151, 157–158, 159–160, 171–175, 202–204, 205, 206.

two centuries ago. But from a distance of more than two centuries we don't think about our nation's birth that way. It is more comforting to think about united colonists rising up as a unified body to get the British lion's paw off the backs of their necks. That is a noble and inspiring David and Goliath story, but it is not what actually happened. It is assuredly not the story of radical democracy's work during the Revolution.

This [study] presents a people's revolution, an upheaval among the most heterogeneous people to be found anywhere along the Atlantic littoral in the eighteenth century. The [study's] thrust is to complicate the well-established core narrative by putting before the reader bold figures, ideas, and movements, highlighting the true radicalism of the American Revolution that was indispensable to the origins, conduct, character, and outcome of the world-shaking event.

By "radicalism" I mean advocating wholesale change and sharp transformation rooted in a kind of dream life of a better future imagined by those who felt most dissatisfied with the conditions they experienced as the quarrel with Great Britain unfolded. For a reformed America they looked toward a redistribution of political, social, and religious power; the discarding of old institutions and the creation of new ones; the overthrowing of ingrained patterns of conservative, elitist thought; the leveling of society so that top and bottom were not widely separated; the end of the nightmare of slavery and the genocidal intentions of land-crazed frontiersmen; the hope of women of achieving a public voice. This radicalism directed itself at destabilizing a society where the white male elite prized stability because it upheld their close grip on political, economic, religious, sexual, and social power. This radicalism, therefore, was usually connected to a multifaceted campaign to democratize society. . . .

The pages that follow mostly view the American Revolution through the eyes of those not in positions of power and privilege, though the iconic founding fathers are assuredly part of the story. In reality, those in the nether strata of colonial society and those outside "respectable" society were most of the people of revolutionary America. Without their ideas, dreams, and blood sacrifices, the American Revolution would never have occurred, would never have followed the course that we can now comprehend, and would never have reverberated around the world among oppressed people down to the present day. Disinterring these long-forgotten figures from history's cemetery, along with their aspirations and demands, along with the events and dramatic moments in which they figured so importantly, is offered as an antidote to the art of forgetting. . . .

[I]t is not surprising that imperial decisions made in England as the Seven Years' War drew to a close sparked anger and upheaval in North America. A key element in this destabilization was the remarkable center-stage appearance of lower-class and enslaved people, whom colonial leaders had always hoped to keep in the wings, if not offstage altogether. In some sectors

of colonial society, radical insurgency arose quite apart from England's attempts to rule its overseas colonies with a stronger hand. In other cases, external and internal stimuli of radical behavior overlapped and interacted. Whether stimulated externally or ignited internally, ferment during the years from 1761 to 1766 changed the dynamics of social and political relations in the colonies and set in motion currents of reformist sentiment with the force of a mountain wind. Critical to this half decade was the colonial response to England's Stamp Act, more the reaction of common colonists than that of their presumed leaders.

When dawn broke on August 14, 1765, Bostonians tramping to work found an effigy of Andrew Oliver, who was as respectable and well heeled a man as anyone in the city, clad in rags and dangling from a giant elm tree at the crossing of Essex and Orange Streets in the city's South End. This is where a narrow neck of land led from Boston to the farm villages west of the town. Attached to the effigy was the verse. "A goodlier sight who e'er did see? A Stamp-Man hanging on a tree!" Strung up alongside Oliver's effigy was a worn "Jack-Boot with a Head and horns peeping out of the top." The boot was painted green on the bottom—"a Green-ville sole," said the sign. The boot was a clever pun on the unpopular earl of Bute, King George's trusted adviser, and George Grenville, first lord of the Treasury and chancellor of the Exchequer. Colonial Americans regarded these two men as the architects of detested new imperial policies, especially the hated Stamp Act passed by Parliament on March 22, 1765, and scheduled to take effect on November 1. Oliver had been appointed as the distributor of the stamps for Boston and the entire colony of Massachusetts.

Before the day was over, laboring Bostonians, joined by middling townsmen, turned the city upside down. The "Stamp Act crisis," as historians have called it, had begun. In the cascading reactions to the Stamp Act, we can see how discontent over England's tightening of the screws on its American colonies merged with resentment born out of the play of events indigenous to colonial life. A perceptive witness of the mass disorder occurring from one end of the colonies to the other over the Stamp Act would have seen that several revolutions were about to erupt simultaneously. . . .

Bostonians knew vaguely about the tricky constitutional question raised by the Stamp Act: whether Parliament had the right to pass a tax simply to raise revenue—an internal tax—when the colonies had no representation in Parliament. American colonists, with rare exceptions, agreed that Parliament was entitled to pass external taxes meant to control the flow of trade. But ordinary Bostonians knew something beyond a quibble: that Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson had arranged the appointment of his brother-in-law Andrew Oliver to be the distributor of the hated stamps. Common folk also knew that both men were leaders of the prerogative circle gathered around the royal governor, an imperious group that had recently tried to dismantle Boston's town meeting and showed contempt for ordinary people

who dared to think of themselves as entitled to a role in political affairs. All of Boston also knew that their provincial legislature had elected three men to gather with delegates from other colonies to meet in New York in October 1765 to hammer out an intercolonial protest to Parliament about the Stamp Act. The crowd, however, had no intention to wait for the Stamp Act Congress to meet.

At midmorning on August 14, Hutchinson ordered Sheriff Stephen Greenleaf to cut down the effigies, and at that moment the question of rightful authority moved from the chambers of constituted authority to the streets. Quickly, a crowd assembled to stop the sheriff. All day, common Bostonians detained farmers bringing produce into town along Orange Street until they had their goods "stamped" under the great elm standing at the neck of land. At the end of working hours, a mass of laboring men began forming for a mock funeral. Their leader was Ebenezer MacIntosh, a poor shoemaker and veteran of the Seven Years' War. . . . With MacIntosh acting as "the principal leader of the mob," as Governor Francis Bernard described the action, the crowd cut down Oliver's effigy as dark came on and carried it through the streets toward the Town House, the center of government where the legislature met. Then the crowd headed for the South End wharves, where Oliver had built a brick office for distributing the detested stamps. In less than thirty minutes they leveled the building. Saving the timbers, they "stamped" them in derision of the Stamp Act, and hauled them to Oliver's luxurious house at the foot of Fort Hill. At nightfall, they added the timbers to a bonfire atop the hill. By the light of the bonfire, they beheaded Oliver's effigy and then destroyed Oliver's stable house and his horse-drawn coach and chaise—prime emblems of upper-class affluence. Later in the evening, when Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson and Sheriff Greenleaf tried to stop the destruction, the crowd drove them off in a hailstorm of stones after someone cried out: "The Governor and the Sheriff! To your arms, my boys." For another four hours, deep into the night, the crowd tore through Oliver's house, breaking windows and a looking glass said to be the largest in the colonies, demolishing the elegant furniture, emptying the contents of the well-stocked wine cellar, and tearing up the gardens. The next day the shocked Oliver asked to be relieved of his commission as stamp distributor.

Twelve days later it was Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson's turn. After attacking the handsome houses of the deputy register of the vice admiralty court and the comptroller of Customs, a crowd of men in workaday garb descended on Hutchinson's mansion. Catching the lieutenant governor at dinner with his family, the crowd smashed in the doors with axes and sent the Hutchinsons packing. Working with almost military precision, they reduced the furniture to splinters, stripped the walls bare, chopped through inner partitions until the house was a hollow shell, destroyed the formal gardens, drank the wine cellar dry, stole nine hundred pounds sterling in coin

(today this would be about \$90,000), scattered books and papers in the street, and carried off every movable object of value. Led again by MacIntosh, the crowd worked into the night, spending almost three hours alone "at the cupola before they could get it down" and then finishing off the building as dawn broke. "Gentlemen of the army, who have seen towns sacked by the enemy," wrote one of the first historians of the Revolution, Boston's William Gordon, "declare they have never before saw an instance of such fury. . . ."

Hutchinson knew why his townsmen hated the tightening of trade regulations and the imposition of a new tax. But only by considering the wrath he had incurred among ordinary people over many years could he have understood their determination to bring his house level with the street. He never admitted such understanding in his correspondence or private conversations that have survived in the documentary record. But it is clear that the crowd was giving vent to years of resentment at the accumulation of wealth and power by the haughty prerogative faction led by Hutchinson. Behind every swing of the ax and every hurled stone, behind every shattered crystal goblet and splintered mahogany chair, lay the fury of a plain Bostonian who had read or heard the repeated references to impoverished people as "rabble" and to Boston's popular caucus, led by Samuel Adams, as a "herd of fools, tools, and sycophants." The mobbish attackers were those who had suffered economic hardship while others fattened their purses just the year before, they had listened to their popular leaders condemn those "who grind the faces of the poor without remorse, eat the bread of oppression without fear, and wax fat upon the spoils of the people." They had heard it said over and over that "luxury and extravagance are. . . destructive of those virtues which are necessary for the preservation of liberty and the happiness of the people." They had burned inwardly at hearing some of the wealthy proclaim from their mansions that poverty was the best inducement for industry and frugality and that "the common people of this town and country live too well." And they had cheered James Otis when he replied that "I am of a quite different opinion, I do not think they live half well enough. . . ."

While crowds took to the streets up and down the Atlantic seaboard shouting "liberty and no stamps," it entered the minds of many colonists that the constant talk about liberty—and its opposite, slavery—might become highly contagious, and applied to an issue far more fundamental than a modest tax imposed by England. In every colony, white leaders began to wonder about how restive slaves might react to the rhetoric fueling the disturbances related to the Stamp Act. While seeking freedom from parliamentary taxes, while deploping English tyranny and supposed attempts to "enslave" colonists, the Americans unexpectedly faced a profound contradiction as they scrambled to suppress enslaved Africans with their own urges to be free. . . .

Nobody in England's North American colonies wanted a more radical change than those who abhorred the practice of enslaving and brutalizing

fellow human beings. A crescendo of objections to the continuance of slavery, mounting in the two years before the Declaration of Independence, gave hope that an ancient blotch on humaneness and morality might come to an end in a part of the world where people prided themselves on being part of a redeemer society destined to teach the world at large. The abolitionists' pamphlets that rolled off the presses, mostly in the northern cities, were longer, shriller, and more numerous and trenchant than those of the previous decade. The old argument of the Enlightenment philosophers that slavery was the central impediment to the march of progress continued. So did the insistence that American patriots be consistent about their proclamations of liberty and unalienable rights. But now, with war imminent, the new militancy of slaves and an astounding royal proclamation made the issue of abolition all the more urgent. . . .

Many slaves could not wait for benevolent masters and mistresses to set them free. From northern New England to the Georgia-Florida border, previous strategies to obtain freedom—petitioning legislatures for a general emancipation, bringing individual freedom suits before local courts, and taking flight in the hope of successfully posing as free men and women—now expanded to a fourth highly risky but less complicated option: offering the British their services in exchange for freedom and inducing the British to issue a general proclamation that would provide an opportunity for masses of slaves to burst their shackles.

In Boston, after he had been appointed the military governor of Massachusetts in April 1774, General Thomas Gage was determined to ram the new British policy down the throats of truculent Bostonians. Five months later, he received offers of help in this difficult matter from an unlikely source. Knowing that Governor Gage had dissolved the Massachusetts legislature, thereby foreclosing that avenue of ending slavery, Boston's slaves now offered to take up the sword against their masters. In late September 1774, fourteen months before Virginia's royal governor issued his famous proclamation offering freedom to any slave or indentured servant reaching the British forces, enslaved Bostonians tried to turn rumors of British intentions into concrete policy. "There has been in town a conspiracy of the Negroes," Abigail Adams wrote her husband, now in Philadelphia as a delegate to the First Continental Congress. "At present it is kept pretty private and was discovered by one who endeavored to dissuade them from it; he being threatened with his life, applied . . . for protection." Abigail continued that "They conducted in this way . . . to draw up a petition to the Governor, telling him they would fight for him provided he would arm them and engage to liberate them if he conquered." For white Bostonians, who prided themselves as a different breed from Virginia and Carolina slave masters, this came as a shock. Benjamin Franklin's judgment nearly twenty years before that "every slave may be reckoned a domestic enemy" was being chillingly confirmed. . . .

Slaves in tidewater Virginia did their part to shape English policy on the emancipation issue through a rash of uprisings in early 1775. On April 21, only two days after the minutemen riddled Gage's troops, who were sent to capture the colonial arsenals at Lexington and Concord, determined slaves made their move. John Murray, earl of Dunmore, had already moved from the governor's mansion in Williamsburg, Virginia's capital, to the *Fowey*, a British warship anchored in the lower York River. From here he dispatched a detachment to seize barrels of gunpowder in Williamsburg and bring them to the British warships. Edmund Randolph, Jefferson's son-in-law, later claimed that the governor's intention was to disarm the Virginians and "weaken the means of opposing an insurrection of the slaves . . . for a whom in part the magazine was at first built." Seeing their chance, a number of slaves in Williamsburg offered to join Dunmore and "take up arms." To cow white patriot Virginians, Dunmore now warned that he "would declare freedom to the slaves and reduce the City of Williamsburg to ashes" if the hastily raised militia units threatened him.

Ten days later, on May 1, 1775, Dunmore made an earthshaking decision in favor of what one white Virginian called "the most diabolical" scheme to "offer freedom to our slaves and turn them against their masters." Writing to the secretary of state in London, Dunmore set out his plan "to arm all my own Negroes and receive all others that will come to me whom I shall declare free." It was a policy, remembered South Carolina's William Drayton, that "was already known" by slaves, who "entertain ideas that the present contest was for obliging us to give them their liberty." Near panic engulfed the South. "The newspapers were full of publications calculated to excite the fears of the people—massacres and instigated insurrections were the words in the mouth of every child," remembered Indian superintendent John Stuart. Stuart himself was part of the potential insurrection. Charlestonians drove him from the city after he was suspected of plotting to draw Creek Indians into the conflict on the British side. Stuart fled to Saint Augustine, Florida, to await the British occupation of South Carolina. . . .

The roll call of Virginia revolutionary leaders was also the roll call of Virginia speculators in western land whose rights, they believed, had been obliterated by a series of policy decisions, legal judgments, and Parliamentary acts in 1774, including the Quebec Act. The man who was the principal author of Virginia's Declaration of Rights and Virginia's new state constitution, George Mason, "had watched the Proclamation of 1763 destroy first his beloved Ohio Company and then his hopes of obtaining fifty thousand acres of Kentucky land. . . ." The man who would introduce the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress in July 1776, Richard Henry Lee, had been appalled by how the 1763 Proclamation Act and the Quebec Act dashed his Mississippi Land Company's hopes to lay hands on 2.5 million acres. The man who would lead the Continental army, George Washington, had thousands of acres of bounty lands that he purchased cheaply

from veterans' claims slip from his hands as a result of the English attempt to stop Virginia land speculation. The man who drafted the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, had invested in three land companies that would have given him title to 17,000 acres if the ministry in London had not cracked down. And the man whose fiery speeches helped push the colonies to the brink of revolution, Patrick Henry, saw five of his land ventures disappear like smoke. All these disappointments could be undone through a war that would remove the roadblocks—that is, a double war: against England, and against the ancient inhabitants of the fertile region watered by the Ohio River and its tributaries.

The Quebec Act was obnoxious not only to Virginians but to many colonists speculating in lands north of the Ohio River. The act also fiercely offended Protestant New Englanders because it guaranteed Catholic Canadians the right to worship freely. Hence, they folded the Quebec Act into the other Coercive Acts of 1774 and branded them all as "intolerable." But for the Six Iroquois Nations the Quebec Act promised relief from the frantic speculation and squatting in the lands reserved for the Iroquois and other northern tribes. . . .

As the Iroquois pondered their position, the matter became more urgent when several companies of New Englanders and New Hampshire backwoodsmen, completely unauthorized by the Continental Congress, attacked and captured Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point on Lake Champlain on May 10–11, 1775. Under the joint command of Benedict Arnold and Ethan Allen (who wrestled dangerously for command of this private expeditionary army), the attack at dawn succeeded without a shot being fired. Surrounding the fort, Allen called out to the British officer, who commanded only about forty men: "Come out of there, you damned old rat." When asked in whose name the Americans were fighting, the ever bull headed Allen replied, "In the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress." Neither had authorized the attack. But this victory made the Iroquois' problem no less severe. . . .

Another Grand Iroquois council met at the end of July 1775 in Montreal to listen to [Quebec] Governor [Guy] Carleton's plea for Iroquois support. Joseph Brant participated in a mock feast to devour "a Bostonian and drink his blood—an ox having been roasted for the purpose, and a pipe of wine given to drink." Along with some 1,700 Indians, Brant listened intently as Guy Carleton promised the Mohawks that if they took up the hatchet "to defend our country," they would recover all their stolen property after the British put the Americans in their place and forced their obedience to royal authority. . . .

[John] Adams, especially in his public pronouncements, had nervous fits about the leveling spirit breaking out in all the colonies. It was one thing to bring the high and mighty down a rung or two, but quite another to allow those on the bottom rungs to spring upward. Like his cousin Sam, he

believed that in a republic the distance between rich and poor should not be too great. But if this leveling of income and wealth shaded into indiscipline or challenges to the authority of the well-born and educated, he saw the beast of anarchy beckoning. Writing from Philadelphia to Abigail, who was tending the farm and raising their four children in Braintree, Massachusetts, three hundred miles to the north, Adams complained that “our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere. That children and apprentices were disobedient—that schools and colleges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their masters.” This casting off of deference disturbed Adams. Released from the bottle, could the genie ever be recaptured?

That the genie was not always masculine also troubled Adams. His wife Abigail tasked him on just this issue. Her husband’s long absences from home and the strain of running their farm by herself just outside British-occupied Boston, along with the death of her mother in the fall of 1775, all seemed to bring her to a new state of consciousness about what the looming revolution might hold for the women who were playing such an important role in the nonimportation and homespun movements. “In the Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make,” she wrote John on March 31, 1776, “I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors.” In this much quoted passage, Abigail went from desire to demand. “Do not put such unlimited power into the hand of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.” A few paragraphs earlier Abigail had wondered about just how real the “passion for liberty” was among those who still kept fellow humans enslaved. Now she pushed the point home about men enslaving women. “That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex.”

In this letter we see clearly how women of Abigail Adams’s intellectual mettle nimbly made the connection between civil and domestic government. The more male leaders railed against England’s intentions to “enslave” its colonial “subjects,” to rule arbitrarily, to act tyrannically, the more American women began to rethink their own marital situations. The language of protest against England reminded many American women that they too were badly treated “subjects”—the subjects of husbands who often dealt with them cruelly and exercised power over them arbitrarily. Most American women, still bound by the social conventions of the day, were not yet ready to organize

in behalf of greater rights. But the protests against England stirred up new thoughts about what seemed arbitrary or despotic in their own society, and many women began to think that what had been endured in the past was no longer acceptable. This paved the way for change. Abigail's reference to the cruelty men used against their wives probably refers to the "rule of thumb" that the law upheld. Deeply imbedded in England's common law, and encoded in Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, the rule of thumb made it permissible for husbands to beat their wives so long as the stick or club did not exceed the thickness of a male thumb. The reference to using women with indignity probably referred to the emotional and psychological domination of wives by husbands. For all his love of Abigail, John's reply to her letter of March 31, 1776, confirmed the point. "As to your extraordinary code of laws," he wrote, "I cannot but laugh." Then referring to the growing insubordination of children, apprentices, Indians, slaves, and college students, he sniffed that "your letter was the first intimation that another tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a compliment but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out. . . ."

Abigail was not amused. She knew that it was not the British ministry that stirred up women and others grating against their subordination. Instead of writing John after receiving his dismissive letter, she unburdened herself to her friend Mercy Otis Warren, the sister of John Otis and wife of James Warren, a Massachusetts legislator. "He is very saucy to me in return for a list of female grievances which I transmitted to him," she wrote Mercy. "I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress." Why, she wondered, was her husband so insensitive to what seemed an opportunity to enact a more "generous plan," "some laws in our favor upon just and liberal principles" by which the law would curb "the power of the arbitrary and tyrannic to injure us with impunity?" Under revised law, women could gain court protection against abusive husbands and not lose their property and wages to men once they married. For raising just and liberal principles, she bitterly told Mercy, he scoffed at her and called her saucy. "So I have helped the sex abundantly," she closed, "but I will tell him I have only been making trial of the disinterestedness of his virtue, and when weighed in the balance have found it wanting." Mercy Otis Warren, who had already crossed the boundaries of correct female behavior by writing two patriot plays that pilloried Thomas Hutchinson and other Loyalists, sympathized with Abigail and told other women that the criticism of females who interested themselves in politics should be resisted. . . .

Adams tried to end the argument on a high note by complimenting Abigail as a "Stateswoman" as well as "a Farmeress." But for Abigail, the matter was not closed. Years later she insisted that "I will never consent to have our sex considered in an inferior point of light. Let each planet shine in their own orbit. God and nature designed it so—if man is Lord, woman is

Lordess—that is what I contend for.” Like a stone cast into a pond, ripples radiated outward from this private family argument auguring currents of change far beyond the Adams family.

PRIMARY SOURCES

The primary sources in this section reflect the concerns and experiences of various people during the struggle for independence. As you evaluate these sources, consider what they reveal about the desire to achieve greater equality and to what extent they support the argument that the American fight for independence from Britain unleashed a struggle to achieve greater equality and rights at home.

2

When the Stamp Act went into effect on November 1, 1765, a crowd of angry men in New York targeted Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden, a defender of British policy in the colonies. The crowd was led by a group of men from the middle rank of New York society that came to be known as the Sons of Liberty. Several days later, Colden recounted the incident in a report to officials in Britain. Note the type of property the mob attacked. Why do you think many of New York’s “gentlemen” may have come out to “observe”?

An Account of a Stamp Act Riot (1765)

Sir,

In a day or two after the date of my letter of the 26th of last month. . . the packages of stamped papers were landed from His Majesty’s ship *Garland* at noonday without a guard or the least appearance of discontent among the people. . . . But on the evening of the first day of this month the mob began to collect together, and after it became dark they came up to the Fort Gate with a great number of torches, and a scaffold on which two images were placed, one to represent the governor in his grey hairs, & the other the devil by his side. This scaffold with the images was brought up within 8 or 10 feet of the gate with the grossest ribaldry from the mob. As they went from the gate they broke open my coach house, took my chariot out of it & carried it

Source: Cynthia A. Kierner, *Revolutionary America 1750–1815: Sources and Interpretations* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 74–75; originally from Cadwallader Colden to Secretary Conway, November 5, 1765, in E. B. O’Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 15 vols. (Albany, N.Y., 1853–1887), VII: p. 771.

round the town with the images, & returned to the Fort Gate, from whence they carried them to an open place, where they had erected a gibbet, within 100 yards of the Fort Gate & there hung up the images. After hanging some time they were burnt in a fire prepared for the purpose, together with my chariot, a single horse chair and two sledges, our usual carriages when snow is on the ground, which they took out of my coach house. While this was doing a great number of gentlemen of the town if they can be called so, stood around to observe the outrage on their King's governor. The garrison was at the same time on the ramparts with preparation sufficient to destroy them, but not a single return in words or otherwise was made from any man in the fort, while this egregious insult was performing. . . . It is given out that the mob will storm the fort this night. I am not apprehensive of their carrying out their purpose; probably it might be attended with much bloodshed because a great part of the mob consists of men who had been privateers & disbanded soldiers whose view it is to plunder the town.

This goes by Major James of the Royal Artillery who with much zeal for his Majesty's service put the fort in the best posture of defence he could, for reason which the mob, the same night they insulted their governor, broke open his house, burnt all his furniture, wearing clothes and every thing in it to a great value, at the same time threatening to take away his life in the most shameful manner.

3

In early 1766, the Sons of Liberty took action against two New York merchants who abided by the Stamp Act when they accepted customs documents issued on stamped paper. What does this account of that punishment reveal about the dangers facing the middling men in the Sons of Liberty as they turned to crowd action to protest the Stamp Act?

A Mob Punishes Merchants (1766)

The matter was intended to be done privately, but it got wind, and by ten o'clock I suppose two thousand 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 dispatched to the collector for the stamped bonds, of which he had thirty in all. He desired liberty to confer with the governor, which was granted. The governor sent word, if the stamps were delivered to him, he would give his word and honor they should not be used; but that if the

Source: David Hawke, ed., *U.S. Colonial History: Reading and Documents* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), pp. 405–406; originally from John Holt to Mrs. Benjamin Franklin, February 15, 1766, *Franklin Papers*, XLVIII: p. 92.

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 governor's proposal, but insisted upon the stamp being delivered 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 ordered himself to kindle the fire and consume them, those filled in and all. This was accordingly done amid the huzzas of the people, who were by this time swelled to the number I suppose of about five thousand, and in another hour I suppose would have been ten thousand. The people pretty quietly dispersed soon after, but their resentment was not allayed. Toward the evening, . . . though the Sons of Liberty exerted themselves to the utmost, they could not prevent the gathering of the multitude, who went to Mr. [Charles] Williams' [New York's naval officer] house, broke open the door, and destroyed some of the furniture. But through the influence of the Sons of Liberty and on his most earnest entreaty and promise in the most public manner to ask pardon next day, or do whatever they should require of him, they were prevailed on to leave the house, and then went to the merchants, where after huzzaing for some time, they were prevailed upon to forbear doing any mischief—on consideration that both men were well beloved in town and bore fair character. . . .

. . . [M]any 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.

4

Gouverneur Morris was a New York "aristocrat" opposed to British policies in the colonies. He also kept a close eye on his fellow colonists' responses to British actions. In this source, Morris discusses the people's involvement in anti-British protests after the passage of the Coercive Acts. What are his fears regarding the consequences of such involvement?

A Gentleman Comments on the Mob (1774)

Dear Sir:

You have heard, and you will hear a great deal about politics, and in the heap of chaff you may find some grains of good sense. Believe me, sir, freedom and religion are the only watchwords. We have appointed a committee, or rather we have nominated one. Let me give you a history of it. . . .

Source: Cynthia A. Kierner, *Revolutionary America 1750–1815: Sources and Interpretations* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 102–103; originally from Gouverneur Morris to Thomas Penn, May 20, 1774, in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., 6 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1837–1853), I: pp. 342–343.

The troubles in America during Grenville's administration. . . stimulated some daring coxcombs to rouse the mob into an attack upon the bounds of order and decency. These fellows became. . . the leaders in all the riots, the bell-weatherers of the flock. . . That we have been in hot water with the British Parliament ever since everybody knows. . . The port of Boston has been shut up. These [mobs], simple as they are, cannot be gulled as heretofore. In short, there is no ruling them, and now. . . the heads of the mobility 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 labour for 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 school-masters 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. 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.

5 Even before 1776, colonies began to create new governments to replace the old ones connected to the imperial government of Great Britain. Three weeks after the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia, citizens in one western North Carolina county passed resolutions designed to replace imperial rule there. To what extent do the provisions regarding military affairs and law enforcement reflect democratic or egalitarian sentiments?

Source: Cynthia A. Kierner, *Revolutionary America 1750–1815: Sources and Interpretations* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 123–124; originally from W. L. Saunders et al., eds., *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, 30 vols. (Raleigh, Winston, Goldsboro, and Charlotte, 1886–1914), IX: pp. 1282–1284.

Mecklenburg County Resolves (1775)

1. That all commissions civil and military heretofore granted by the Crown to be exercised in these colonies are null and void and the constitution of each particular colony wholly suspended.
2. That the Provincial Congress of each Province under the direction of the great Continental Congress is invested with all legislative and executive powers within their respective Provinces and that no other legislative or executive power does or can exist at this time in any of these colonies.
3. As all former laws are now suspended in this Province and the Congress have not yet provided others we judge it necessary for the better preservation of good order, to form certain rules and regulations for the internal government of this county until laws shall be provided for us by the Congress.
4. That the inhabitants of this county do meet on a certain day appointed by the committee and having formed themselves into nine companies. . . eight in the county and one in the town of Charlotte do choose a Colonel and other military officers who shall hold and exercise their several powers by virtue of this choice and independent of the Crown of Great Britain and former constitution of this Province.
5. That for the better preservation of the peace and administration of justice each of those companies do choose from their own body two discreet freeholders who shall be empowered each by himself and singly to decide and determine all matters of controversy arising within said company under the sum of twenty shillings and jointly and together all controversies under the sum of forty shillings, that so as their decisions may admit of appeal to the convention of the selectmen of the county and also that anyone of these men shall have power to examine and commit to confinement persons accused of petit larceny.
6. That those two selectmen thus chosen do jointly and together choose from the body of their particular body two persons properly qualified to act as constables who may assist them in the execution of their office.
7. That upon the complaint of any persons to either of these selectmen he do issue his warrant directed to the constable commanding him to bring the aggressor before him or them to answer said complaint.

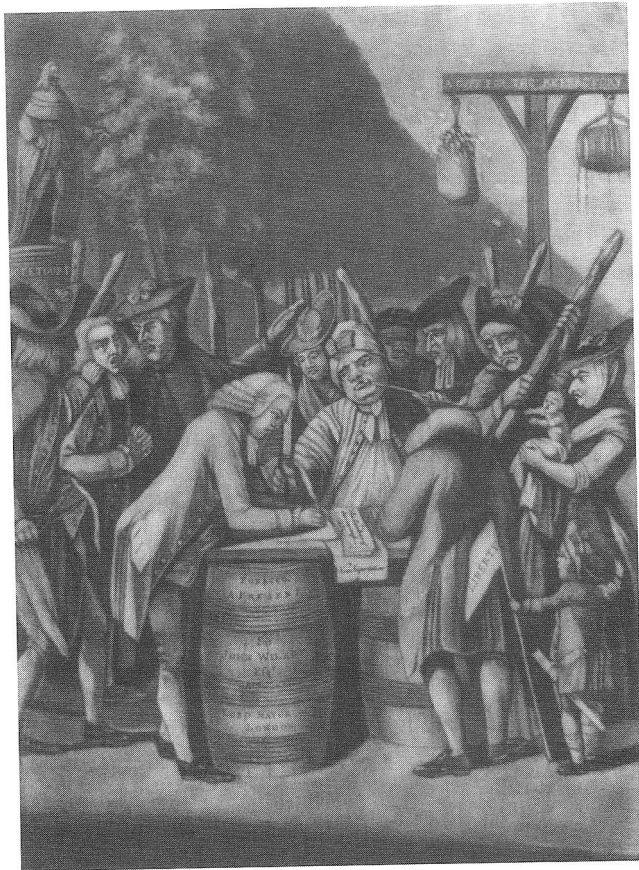
6

As in other colonies, by 1775, patriots in Virginia often took it upon themselves to force merchants to sign agreements prohibiting the importation of British goods. This source depicts one such action, probably to enforce resolutions passed by the Williamsburg Convention, which was operating by then as an extralegal government in the colony. The merchants could either comply with non-importation agreements or face the

"alternative": the gallows with a keg of tar and a bag of feathers. Notice, on the left, one merchant being led toward them. To the victim's right, a patriot with scissors in hand is ready to cut off his hair before tarring and feathering him. Finally, notice the mix of people, including women and, at the rear, an African American.

The Alternative of Williamsburg (1775)

PHILIP DAWE



Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. [LC-USZ62-9488].

7

After the decision for independence, the states began to draft constitutions for new state governments. One of the most important issues confronting the framers of these documents was whether to lower, or abolish altogether, the property qualification for voting. Some states, such as Virginia, left the colonial property qualification unchanged. In Pennsylvania, however, voting was opened to all male taxpayers at least twenty-one years of age. As this dialogue between fictional characters published in a Philadelphia newspaper demonstrates, that provision for broad voting rights aroused the concern of some people. What is the argument offered here against such a liberal standard?

“A Dialogue between Orator Puff and Peter Easy” (1776)

Orator: Now all will be put on a level with respect to this grand right of voting at elections, and that may in time bring them to a level in every other respect, as has happened in other countries.

Peter: This is a great step, neighbour Puff, and may have very extraordinary consequences. Thou must be convinced, I believe, that a large majority of Pennsylvania, at present, consists of freeholders, and honest, industrious, frugal people, who are worth at least fifty pounds each.

Orator: I am convinced of that truth; but what would you argue from that?

Peter: Why, I cannot perceive the propriety or prudence of putting these inhabitants upon a level with the indolent or prodigal, who have not acquired such a small sum as fifty pounds, in a country where the acquiring of such a sum is not difficult, especially for a single man. If the privilege [of voting] extended only to those who had families, here there would not be so much in it; or if there was any other “sufficient evidence” of their attachment to the state required. Besides, it appears clearly to be an injury to all the inhabitants of the state, who are worth *fifty* pounds in real or personal estate. For the right of electing is vested in them, by the laws of Pennsylvania, and in them alone, and therefore the extending the same right to all men without distinction. . . takes away so much of their right, from those who are worth fifty pounds, and proportionately lessens their influence in elections, and therefore in the state. What necessity is there for this general alteration? Can’t the liberties and happiness of Pennsylvania be trusted to those men in it, who are worth *fifty* pounds each? And should we go to wreck and ruin, unless we are saved by those who are not worth that sum? . . . Such people, having nothing to lose, and a prospect of gaining by public convulsions, are

Source: Cynthia A. Kierner, *Revolutionary America 1750–1815: Sources and Interpretations* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 205–207; originally from *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, October 24, 1776.

always the most ready to engage in seditions, tumultuous and factious proceedings. They are the people to whom artful, delighting, selfish, ambitious, daring, wicked men apply themselves, and make use of to promote their pernicious projects. They are generally the most illiterate and ignorant of the whole of society, and therefore, the most easily imposed on by such men as I have described. . . . On the other hand, while the rights of election, that is of sovereignty, as I said, are lodged in those who possess the general property, landed and personal within this state, it will ever be in their interest to keep things quiet, and to have officers go on with regularity; and if the other class grows turbulent, the whole force and dignity of the government can be exerted to keep them in order.

8

The large number of petitions for freedom by black slaves during the American Revolution demonstrates that many of them saw the hypocrisy in slaveholders' proclamations of liberty to protest British tyranny. This petition by free blacks to the Massachusetts legislature was one of many calling for the abolition of slavery in the state. Although the legislature never acted on those petitions, the state's supreme court declared slavery unconstitutional in 1783. What are the arguments against slavery in this petition? How do you account for its tone?

Antislavery Petition of Massachusetts Free Blacks (1777)

To the Honorable Counsel & House of *[Representa]tives* for the State of Massachusetts Bay in General Court *assembled*, January 13, 1777

The petition of A Great Number of Blackes detained in a State of slavery in the Bowels of a free & Christian Country Humbly sheweth that your Petitioners apprehend that they have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Grat Parent of the Unavers hath Bestowed equalley on all menkind and which they have Never forfeited by any Compact or agreement whatever—but that wher Unjustly Dragged by the hand of cruel Power from their Derest friends and sum of them Even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents—from A populous Pleasant and plentiful country and in violation of Laws of Nature and off Nations and in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity Brough hear Either to Be sold Like Beast of Burthen & Like them Condemnd to Slavery for Life—Among A People Profesing the mild Religion of Jesus A people Not Insensible of the Secrets of Rational Being Nor without spirit to Resent the unjust

Source: Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States from Colonial Times through the Civil War* (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1973), pp. 9–10; originally from *Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5th ser. (Boston, 1877), III: pp. 432–437.

endeavours of others to Reduce them to a state of Bondage and Subjection your honouer Need not to be informed that A Live of Slavery Like that of your petioners Deprived of Every social privilege of Every thing Requisite to Render Life Tolable is far worse then Nonexistence.

[In imitat]ion of the Lawdable Example of the Good People of these States your petitioners have Long and Patiently waited the Evnt of petition after petition By them presented to the Legislative Body of this state and cannot but with Grief Reflect that their Success hath ben but too similar they Cannot but express their Astonishment that It have Never Bin Considered that Every Principle from which America has Acted in the Cours of their unhappy Difficultes with Great Briton Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favours of your petioners they therfor humble Beseech your honours to give this petition its due weight & consideration & cause an act of the Legislatur to be past Whereby they may be Restored to the Enjoyments of that which is the Natural Right of all men—and their Children who wher Born in this Land of Liberty may not be heald as Slaves after they arive at the age of twenty one years so may the Inhabitation of this Stats No longer chargeable with the inconsistency of acting themselves the part which they condemn and oppose in others Be prospered in their present Glorious struggle for Liberty and have those Blessing to them, &c.

9

In 1780, seven black residents of Massachusetts petitioned the state legislature to exempt them from taxation. On what grounds do they do so?

Blacks Protest Taxation (1780)

To The Honourable Council and House of Representatives in General Court assembled for the State of the Massachusetts Bay in New England—March 14th A D 1780—

The petition of several poor Negroes & molattoes who are Inhabitant of the Town of Dartmouth Humbly Sheweth—That we being Chiefly of the African Extract and by Reason of Long Bondag and hard Slavery we have been deprived of Injoying the Profits of our Labouer or the advantage of Inheriting Estates from our Parents as our Neighbourers the white peopel do haveing some of us not long Injoyed our own freedom & yet of late, Contrary to the invariable Custom & Practice of the Country we have been & now are Taxed both in our Polls and that small Pittance of Estate which through much hard Labour & Industry we have got together to Sustain our selves &

Source: Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States from Colonial Times through the Civil War* (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1973), pp. 15–16; originally from *Archives Division, Massachusetts Historical Society*.

families withal—We apprehend it therefore to be hard usag and [one word is illegible here-ed.] doubtless (if Continued will) Reduce us to a State of Beggary whereby we shall become a Berthan to others if not timely prevented by the Interposition of your Justice & power & yor Petitioners farther sheweth that we apprehend ourselves to be Aggrieved, in that while we are not allowed the Privilage of freemen of the State having no vote or Influence in the Election of those that Tax us yet many of our Colour (as is well known) have cheerfully Entered the field of Battle in the defence of the Common Cause and that (as we conceive) against a similar Exertion of Power (in Regard to taxation) too well Known to need a recital in this place. . . .

. . . We most humbly Request therefore that you would take our unhappy Case into your serious Consideration and in your wisdom and Power grant us Relief from Taxation while under our Present depressed Circumstances and your poor Petioners as in duty bound shall ever pray &c*

*In 1783, the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared that blacks who were subject to taxation were entitled to vote.

10

Joseph Brant, also known as Thayendanegea, was an Iroquois chief who was half white. Brant was in London in 1776 and declared his loyalty to the colonial secretary, Lord George Germain. What did Brant seek to gain from his loyalty to Britain?

Chief Thayendanegea Pledges His Loyalty (1776)

Brother.

When we delivered our speech you answered us in few words, that you would take care and have the grievances of the Six Nations on account of their lands, particularly those of the Mohocks and Oughquagas, removed; and all those matters settled to our satisfaction whenever the troubles in America were ended, and that you hoped the Six Nations would continue to behave with that attachment to the King they had always manifested; in which case they might be sure of his Majesty's favour and protection.

Brother. We return you thanks for this promise, which we hope will be performed, and that we shall not be disappointed, as has often been the case, notwithstanding the warm friendship of the Mohocks to his Majesty and his government, who are so immediately concerned, that the same has been often mentioned by the Six Nations and their getting no redress a matter of surprize to all the Indian Nations.

Source: *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York*, VIII, 678.

We are not afraid Brother, or have we the least doubt but our brethren the Six Nations will continue firm to their engagements with the King their father. Our Superintendant knows that in order to keep true to their treaties they have at times punished their friends and Allies.

Brother. The troubles that prevail in America and the distance we are from our country, allows us only to say that on our return we shall inform our Chiefs and Warriors what we have seen and heard and join with them in the most prudent measures for assisting to put a stop to those disturbances notwithstanding reports of their generally taking the strongest side. Which was not the case last Summer when we offered to prevent the invasion of Canada and lost several of our people in defending it. The only reason we mentioned the conduct of the Six Nations at that time was, that they might have credit for what they actually did, as we have heard much that affair has been attributed to the Nippissings and other Indians of Canada.

Brother. As we expect soon to depart for our own Country having been long here, we request you, and the great men who take charge of the affairs of government, not to listen to every story that may be told about Indians; but to give ear only to such things as come from our Chiefs and wise men in Council; which will be communicated to you by our Superintendent.

11

As independence drew near, many Americans began to focus on the question of drafting a new framework for a national government. One of them was Abigail Adams, whose husband John was in Philadelphia as a member of the Second Continental Congress. In March 1776, she wrote him a letter raising the issue of women's rights. How does John Adams deal with his wife's request?

Correspondence between Abigail and John Adams (1776)

Abigail Adams to John Adams:

Braintree March 31, 1776

I long to hear that you have declared an independancy—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if

Source: Excerpts from select letters reprinted by permission of the publisher from *The Adams Papers: Adams Family Correspondence, Volume I: December 1761–May 1776*, edited by L.H. Butterfield, pp. 369–370, 381–382, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1963 by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supream Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

John to Abigail:

Ap. 4. 1776

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient. Read our Privateering Laws, and our Commercial Laws. What signifies a Word.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented.—This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects.

12

Judith Sargent Murray was the daughter of a prominent Massachusetts family and the wife of a merchant. By her own later admission, the American Revolution first led her to question the prevailing attitudes toward women. In 1779, she wrote an essay on "the sexes" and eleven years later, during a period of considerable public discussion regarding women's proper role in the new republic, she submitted a slightly revised version for publication. On what grounds does she argue that women are equal to men?

"On the Equality of the Sexes" (1790)

JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY

Is it upon mature consideration we adopt the idea, that nature is . . . partial in her distributions? Is it indeed a fact, that she hath yielded to one half of the human species so unquestionable a mental superiority? I know that to both sexes elevated understandings, and the reverse, are common. But, suffer me to ask, in what the minds of females are *so* notoriously deficient, or unequal. . . . Will it be said that the judgment of a male of two years old, is more sage than that of a female's of the same age? I believe the reverse is generally observed to be true. But from that period what partiality! how is the one exalted and the other depressed, by the contrary modes of education which are adopted! the one is taught to aspire, and the other is early confined and limited. As their years increase, the sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science. Grant that their minds are by nature equal, yet who shall wonder at the *apparent* superiority, if indeed custom becomes *second nature*; nay if it taketh place of nature, and that it doth the experience of each day will evince. At length arrived at womanhood, the uncultivated fair one feels a void, which the employments allotted her are by no means capable of filling. . . . Now, was she permitted the same instructors as her brother,. . . for the employment of a rational mind an ample field would be opened. In astronomy she might catch a glimpse of the immensity of the Deity, and thence she would form amazing conceptions of the august and supreme Intelligence. In geography she would admire Jehova in the midst of his benevolence; thus adapting this globe to the various wants and amusements of its inhabitants. In natural philosophy she would adore the infinite majesty of heaven, clothed in condescension; and as she traversed the reptile world, she would hail the goodness of a creating God. A mind, thus filled, would have little room for the trifles with which our sex are, with too much justice, accused of amusing themselves, and they would thus be rendered fit companions for those, who should one day wear them as their crown. Fashions, in their variety, would then give place to conjectures, which might perhaps conduce to the improvement of the literary world; and there would be no leisure for slander or detraction. Reputation would not then be blasted, but serious speculations would occupy the lively imaginations of the sex. . . .

Will it be urged that those acquirements would supersede our domestick duties, I answer that every requisite in female economy is easily attained; and, with truth I can add, that when once attained, they require no further

mental attention. Nay, while we are pursuing the needle, or the superintendency of the family, I repeat that our minds are at full liberty for reflection; that imagination may exert itself in full vigor and that if a just foundation early laid, our ideas will then be worthy of rational beings. If we were industrious we might easily find time to arrange them upon paper, or should avocations press too hard for such an indulgence, the hours allotted for conversation would at least become more refined and rational. Should it still be vociferated, "Your domestick employments are sufficient"—I would calmly ask, is it reasonable, that a candidate for immortality, for the joys of heaven, an intelligent being, who is to spend an eternity in contemplating the works of Deity, should at present be so degraded, as to be allowed no other ideas, than those which are suggested by the mechanism of a pudding, or the sewing of the seams of a garment? Pity that all such censurers of female improvement do not go one step further, and deny their future existence; to be consistent they surely ought.

Yes, ye lordly, ye haughty sex, our souls are by nature *equal* to yours; the same breath of God animates, enlivens, and invigorates us; and that we are not fallen lower than yourselves, let those witness who have greatly towered above the various discouragements by which they have been so heavily oppressed; and though I am unacquainted with the list of celebrated characters on either side, yet from the observations I have made in the contracted circle in which I have moved, I dare confidently believe, that from the commencement of time to the present day, there hath been as many females, as males, who, by the *mere force of natural powers*, have merited the crown of applause; who *thus unassisted*, have seized the wreath of fame.

CONCLUSION

Several points should be clear from your analysis of the sources in this chapter. First, primary sources are useful tools to help assess historical arguments. They may reinforce or contradict historians' conclusions, add insights, and raise new questions. Second, as we saw in the first chapter on interpretations in textbooks, often what is missing in a discussion about the past is as significant as those things that are part of the story. In this case, it is useful to think about the kinds of protest that were not included in even a small collection of sources intended to illustrate struggles for social equality during the Revolution. Their absence might also be an important clue regarding the limits of the fight over "who should rule at home."

This second point, in turn, is related to a third. These sources remind us that historians must be careful when generalizing about the past. That point is illustrated particularly well in this chapter's secondary source. Some of the old progressive historians at the beginning of the twentieth century argued that

the War for Independence was *primarily* the result of social conflicts within American society. The author of Source 1, however, makes a more circumscribed argument about the relationship between the fight over home rule and the one over who should rule at home. At the same time, the primary sources illustrate that it is not necessarily easy to prove something as sweeping as a social revolution.

These sources also demonstrate two other related points that will be more closely examined in the next chapters. First, historians must understand the ideas that moved people in the past—and the meaning of those ideas to people at the time. In the case of the Revolution, the idea of equality played a central role in the actions of those who supported independence. Yet, as this chapter's sources illustrate, it did not necessarily mean the same thing or hold the same implications in the minds of these Revolutionaries. Finally, historians must understand their subjects' motives. Did Revolutionaries challenge British actions out of principle? Or did more mundane considerations related to conflicts within American society move them to a certain course of action? Interpretations of the American Revolution cannot ignore this question. In fact, as we will see next, the question of motives is *central* to historians' interpretations and much of history's detective work is a search for clues to explain them.

FURTHER READING

- Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Slaves and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
- Charles Patrick Neimeyer, *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
- Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).
- Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: Random House, 2002).

NOTES

1. Carl L. Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 22.
2. Cited in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *The American Revolution: Two Centuries of Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 73.