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A Bridge for Crispus Attucks?

By

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Sandwiched between a quiet residential neighborhood and a mixed use commercial area near the busy Massachusetts Turnpike sits a spattered, inconspicuous iron and concrete bridge over Cochituate Brook on Old Connecticut Path in the town of Framingham. The structure's one distinguishing characteristic is a bronze historic marker with a brief dedication to Crispus Attucks, a dock worker of mixed African American and Native American ancestry, known to popular history as the first patriot to lose his life in the Boston Massacre. Records are sketchy, but Framingham claims Attucks as a locally-born slave who ran away and eluded authorities for over twenty years before his fateful participation in the rowdy disturbance that led to his death on a cobblestone Boston street on March 5, 1770. The story of how the nondescript little bridge in Framingham came to be named in his honor raises important issues about who deserves historic markers and the interests and perspectives of the individuals involved in the process of preserving and presenting a community's past.

Located about twenty miles west of Boston, Framingham is an economically-developed suburb with a diverse population of approximately sixty-seven thousand residents.¹ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the town attracted large numbers of settlers

¹ Town of Framingham, "About Framingham," http://www.framinghamma.gov/web/pages/About_Framingham.htm (accessed June 12, 2006).

who found employment in its numerous factories, mills, and businesses. In recent years, however, the economic life of the community has shifted to retail, medical, service, and other non-industrial enterprises. In the pre-Revolutionary era, when Crispus Attucks reportedly lived in Framingham, it was a growing community of about one thousand inhabitants, mostly farmers, mill owners, and proprietors of small business establishments.² Among the more prominent residents was one William Brown, a clothier and miller, who served the community in a number of capacities including selectman, commissioner of safety, and church deacon. Brown counted among his assets a slave of mixed ancestry, thought to be the son of an African American father and a Native American mother, whose ancestor, John Attucks, was executed in 1676 for his alleged participation in New England's devastating King Phillip's War.

The birthplace of Crispus Attucks is described bluntly by Framingham historian Josiah Temple in his 1887 history of the community as an "old cellar-hole."³ It was evidently still visible in Temple's time but now no longer exists. Little is known of Attucks' early life. Stories of his character and exploits have been passed along by generations of the Brown family. According to the late Raymond J. Callahan, former editor of the local newspaper and a town historian, Crispus was a smooth talker, with a reputation for honesty and loyalty to his master.⁴ Callahan writes that one of Brown's descendants claimed that Attucks was so trusted by the family that he was given the responsibility of trading cattle for his master and allowed to take trips on his own. With a taste of freedom provided at least in part by his various travels, Attucks escaped his bondage while still a relatively young man. A notice to this effect ran in *The Boston Gazette* on October 2, 1750:

² Two comprehensive histories tracing the development of the town of Framingham are Josiah H. Temple, *History of Framingham, Massachusetts: 1640 - 1885* (Framingham, MA: Town of Framingham, 1887) and Stephen W. Herring, *Framingham: An American Town* (Framingham, MA: Framingham Historical Society, 2000).

³ Temple, 254-55.

⁴ Raymond I. Callahan, *Framingham Historical Reflections*, eds. Martha E. Dewar and M. Joan Gilbert (Washington, DC: McGregor and Werner, 1974).

Ran away from his master William Brown of Framingham on the 30th of Sept. last a mulatto fellow about 27 years of age, named Crispus, 6 feet and 2 inches high, short curl'd hair, his knees nearer together than common; and had on a light colour'd beaver skin coat, plain new buckskin breeches, blue yarn stockings and a checked woolen shirt. Whoever shall take up said runaway and convey him to his aforesaid master shall have 10 pounds old tenor reward, and all necessary charges paid. And all masters of vessels and others are hereby cautioned against concealing or carrying off said servant on penalty of law.⁵

This piece of historical evidence tells us that Attucks was tall, knock-kneed, of mixed heritage, and apparently well-dressed for the New England autumn. The promise of a reward and reimbursement for his return indicates that Attucks was a valued servant. Despite the reminder at the end of the notice concerning legal penalties for non-compliance with the law, the ad did not produce the desired results: the runaway was never captured.

Attucks did not emerge on the public scene again until his death in 1770 when, in the aftermath of what patriots labeled the Boston Massacre, a coroner reported that a Michael Johnson had been “wilfully and feloniously murdered at King street.”⁶ This victim, a sailor and dock worker, was carrying papers at the time of his death that identified him as Johnson, but he was in fact the runaway Crispus Attucks, as later

⁵ This notice appears in several contemporary sources including “Historical Profiles: Crispus Attucks,” <http://www.framingham.com/history/profiles/crispus/> (accessed March 13, 2006); Rev. Charles A. Gaines, “Deacon William Brown, The First Parish, and a Moment of Redemption” (sermon, First Parish, Framingham, MA, October 9, 1983); and Callahan, *Historical Reflections*.

⁶ Josephine Elizabeth Rayne and Effie Louise Chapman, eds. *New England Historical and Genealogical Register, Index of Persons*, vol. 44 (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1906 - 1907), 382 - 83.

evidence indicated.⁷ Despite the scarcity of information concerning the life he led and the nature of his character after his escape from the Brown farm, a distinctive picture of Attucks, strikingly different from that of the trustworthy servant presented in Framingham sources, has persisted on the pages of the history texts from which young people learn the story of the nation's past. The following account of Attucks' role in the disturbance of March, 1770 is typical:

At first the crowd taunted the soldiers with cries of "Lobster Backs."...Then the crowd began hurling firewood, stones, snowballs, and oyster shells. Among the colonials was a tall black man named Crispus Attucks, well known in the Boston dock area and probably a runaway slave. The frustrated soldiers stood their ground until, as an eyewitness later said, "Attucks grabbed a soldier's bayonet and threw the man down." The soldiers thereupon fired their muskets.⁸

Attucks is routinely portrayed as the ringleader of a mob of local toughs who goaded the unwelcome British soldiers into firing the fatal shots that led to his death as well as those of four others in the crowd. In defense of the British soldiers charged with their murders, John Adams, the young attorney who would later become the nation's second president, was in part responsible for the perception of Attucks as a ruffian. In presenting his case, Adams vividly described Attucks as a "stout Molatto fellow, whose very looks was enough to terrify any person."⁹ He claimed that Attucks was spied a few minutes before the shots were fired with a large stick in hand leading a group of twenty or

⁷ Herring, 73.

⁸ Winthrop D. Jordan, Miriam Greenblatt, and John S. Bowes. *The Americans: A History* (Evanston, Illinois: McDougal, Littell & Company, 1994), 90.

⁹ Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 281.

more sailors.¹⁰ Adams labeled the crowd “rabble” and “rubbish” and evoked a measure of sympathy for the beleaguered British who, he claimed, were only acting in self-defense.¹¹ This argument was so successful that six of the eight British soldiers charged in the case were acquitted. The other two were convicted of manslaughter but received relatively light sentences. The runaway slave and perceived ringleader who incited the riot went on to become an unlikely hero of the American Revolution. His remains rest in the Granary Burying Ground, a popular stop on Boston’s Freedom Trail along with those of the other victims of the Boston Massacre and a number of major players in the drive for independence including Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and Paul Revere.

Fast forward two hundred and thirty years. It is March 5, 2000, and a group of government officials and interested citizens of Framingham have convened on Old Connecticut Path to dedicate a bridge to Crispus Attucks.¹² Former New England Patriot football player Ron Burton, the recipient of a Crispus Attucks Legacy of Freedom Award, is there as are honor guards from the Natick Colonial Minute Men and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment.¹³ The program includes prayers, music, recognition of the local dignitaries involved in the bridge project, and a keynote speech delivered by Wayne Franidin Smith of the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Foundation. State and local officials read proclamations from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Framingham Board of Selectmen. After the unveiling of the plaque by Stephen Herring, Chairman of the Framingham Historical Commission and the town historian at the time, members of the Natick Praying Indians, the group to which Attucks’ ancestors reportedly belonged, close the ceremony with a song. This day is the culmination of years of

¹⁰ Temple, 255.

¹¹ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 68.

¹² Peter Reuell, “Bridge Dedicated to Attucks,” *Metrowest Daily News*, March 6, 2000.

¹³ The 54th was the first all-black unit to fight in the Civil War. Their contributions were popularized in the 1989 film *Glory*, and a handsome bronze memorial to the unit located across from the Massachusetts State House is considered one of the finest examples of public art in Boston.

research, fundraising, and lobbying conducted by members of the Historical Commission, the Historical Society, and the African-American Heritage Society, as subgroup of the Historical Society.

According to Edwina Weston-Dyer, Chairperson of the African-American Heritage Committee at the time of the bridge dedication, the drive to honor Attacks and the other victims of the Boston Massacre had a long history prior to the Framingharn project.¹⁴ African American abolitionists and other interested parties observed Crispus Attucks Day throughout the nineteenth century and convinced the city of Boston to create a memorial on the Common to those who died in the 1770 incident. It was completed in 1888 and dedicated with appropriate festivities. After the 1996 passage of the United States Commemorative Coin Act to honor African Americans involved in the Revolutionary War, a silver dollar was issued for Crispus Attacks. On the local level, occasional articles concerning Attacks' place in history were published in the *Framinghain News*, and March 5, 1970, the 200th anniversary of the Boston Massacre, was declared Crispus Attucks Day by the Framingham Board of Selectmen.¹⁵

The campaign to name the Old Connecticut Path bridge in honor of Crispus Attacks was spearheaded by Stephen Herring, who helped coordinate the efforts of the various groups interested in the endeavor. He recently reflected on the project as follows: "Commemorating the presence of Crispus Attucks in Framingham had been a goal of mine for many years. Given the status that Attacks had attained as a prominent national figure in Afro-American history, it seemed appropriate that his background as a runaway slave from Framingham should be recognized in some visible public manner."¹⁶ Acting on these sentiments, Herring, in his capacity as chairman of the Framingham Historical Commission, issued a formal request to the group that an already existing bridge, located in close proximity to the farm where Attucks had worked as a slave, be named for him. The Commission agreed, and Herring next

¹⁴ Edwina Weston-Dyer, "Saxonville Resident: War Hero & Former Slave to Be Recognized," *Friends of Saxonville: Newsletter*, Winter, 2000.

¹⁵ James F. Higgins, "Story of Crispus Attucks, Resident of Framingham, Killed in Boston Massacre," *Framingham News*, March 13, 1934; "Selectmen Declare Crispus Attucks Day," *Framingham News*, March 5, 1970.

¹⁶ Stephen W. Herring, e-mail message to author, May 31, 2006.

reported to the Board of Selectmen with his petition. The Board unanimously approved the request. Following these endorsements, Herring worked with the African-American Heritage Committee of the Framingham Historical Society to prepare the plaque and plan the dedication.

A variety of community and regional groups provided funding for the Crispus Attucks Bridge project. These included corporate contributors as well as individuals and government agencies. The Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state institution that promotes the arts, education, and diversity at the community level, was also involved. Overall the cost was modest; honoring Crispus Attucks with a plaque and a ceremony was not an expensive enterprise. The purchase of the plaque was handled by the Framingham Historical Commission, while the African-American Heritage Committee oversaw the dedication day festivities.¹⁷

Although largely a unifying and uplifting event, the naming of the bridge and the declaration of Crispus Attucks Day generated some heated controversy that resulted in a number of conflicting articles, editorials, and letters to the local newspapers. In 2000, about a month before the March ceremony, *Metrowest Daily News* columnist Tom Moroney wrote an article entitled “Crispus Attucks: Hero or Thug?”¹⁸ Moroney began by quoting local history enthusiast Joseph Rizoli, who, in reference to Attucks, had proclaimed: “This guy was no good.” Rizoli compared Attucks to an underworld boss and characterized him as “a hard-drinking bully,” who rounded up a number of other waterfront ruffians to provoke a fight with the British. Hardly motivated by patriotism, claimed Rizoli, the group had an economic grievance because they believed that British-born rope makers were stealing their jobs. After presenting Rizoli’s arguments, Moroney ended the provocative column by asking readers to contact him and share their opinions on the merits of the Crispus Attucks Bridge dedication.

A few days after the Moroney article, the *Boston Globe*, the

¹⁷ Stephen W. Herring, e-mail message to author, August 5, 2006.

¹⁸ Tom Moroney, “Crispus Attucks: Hero or Thug?” *Metrowest Daily News*, February 6, 2000.

region's most influential newspaper, weighed in with a piece by Benjamin Wallace-Wells entitled "Revolt Revisited."¹⁹ In addition to repeating Rizoli's quotes from the Moroney article, Wallace-Wells included comments from noted historians Arthur Young and Pauline Maier. Young observed that, while the events of March 5, 2000 have been fairly well-documented, interpreting them has inspired lively debate throughout the years. He tended to side with Framingham bridge project organizers in their support of Attucks as a true hero of the Revolution. Maier, on the other hand, aligned herself more closely with the opposition camp when she remarked that Attucks and the others were less interested in political ideals than in inciting a good fight. The *Globe* piece also raised the issue of racism as a possible explanation for Rizoli's hard line position. Wallace-Wells quoted Weston-Dyer, whose ancestors were slaves, in her contention that Rizoli's opposition to the bridge naming was based on a lack of historical knowledge and bordered on racism. This argument at the time appeared somewhat puzzling because Rizoli had offered his own candidate for a bridge dedication in Framingham, Peter Salem, also an ex-slave but a much less controversial hero of the American Revolution.

One day after the *Globe* article, Moroney presented the results of reader feedback on the Attucks bridge controversy.²⁰ He reported that a majority of the forty responses he received were "in favor of ditching Attucks as the honoree," and he included a sampling of readers' comments which he called "swift and passionate." Those backing the bridge argued that Attucks was a symbol of freedom because of his escape from slavery and as such was a worthy candidate for the honor in question. Comments from the opposition tended to agree with Rizoli that Attucks was a "rabble rouser." They pitched Peter Salem as a more worthy candidate and scoffed at the accusations of racism as "absolutely ridiculous." Moroney seemed a bit disappointed when he noted that, despite strong reader opposition, the bridge-naming ceremony was still scheduled to take place.

¹⁹ Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "Revolt Revisited," *Boston Globe*, February 9, 2000.

²⁰ Tom Moroney, "Readers Reel Over Tribute to Crispus Attucks," *Metrowest Daily News*, February 10, 2000.

In the days that followed, both the *Metrowest Daily News* and the *Boston Globe* published editorials backing the Crispus Attucks Bridge. The *News* took the position that history should not only be an inspiring record of heroes and villains but should also raise questions and inform the general public.²¹ The endorsement described Attucks as “a man who showed courage, by both escaping slavery and venting his outrage on armed soldiers.” The opening of the *Globe* editorial noted that despite some objections, Attucks’ life “should be honored for its American complexity.”²² The *Globe* editorial stated the position, as did some of the readers who responded to Moroney’s original column, that it was not so much Attucks’ role in the Boston Massacre that should be the centerpiece of the bridge naming but his symbolic significance as a person who had “faith in the cause of independence.” Finally, in a follow-up column about a week before the bridge dedication, Moroney offered his considered position that he sided “with those who say go ahead and name the bridge for Attucks.”²³ After all the controversy, Moroney came to the conclusion that Attucks, despite his flaws, was a “symbol of resistance” made all the more effective by the fact that he was a runaway slave. Moroney also reported that in the end, despite early responses in which a majority of the respondents opposed the bridge, about half of his reader mail ultimately lined up in favor of the honor for Attucks.

One aspect of the controversy over the naming of Crispus Attucks Bridge that begs for more attention is the claim by some of those who opposed the project that Peter Salem, also a former slave and resident of Framingham, was a more worthy candidate for the honor. Unlike Attucks, who became largely an accidental hero, Salem’s role in the military campaigns of the Revolutionary War was deliberate and well-documented. His name is listed on the muster rolls of Framingham’s Minutemen under the command of Captain Simon Edgell, who marched to Concord in April, 1775, where the opening shots of the War

²¹ Editorial, *Metrowest Daily News*, February 13, 2000.

²² Editorial, *Boston Globe*, February 17, 2000.

²³ Tom Moroney, “Attucks Bridge Starts a Second Revolution.” *Metrowest Daily News*, February 27, 2000.

for Independence were fired.²⁴ It appears again among those who fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill and is recorded in the final accounting of “Three Years Men,” individuals from the town who re-enlisted and saw lengthy service in the war.²⁵ Salem is credited with firing the shot that killed Major John Pitcairn at Bunker Hill, and his image is depicted in the lower right corner of the familiar John Trumbull painting of the battle.²⁶ Why then was this undisputed resident of Framingham, who shared with Crispus Attucks a heritage of slavery and a role in the War for Independence, bypassed by the groups who orchestrated the bridge project in 2000? A review of Salem and his life after his participation in the historic events of the American Revolution might shed some light.

Also known as Salem Middlesex, Peter Salem was born a slave in Framingham.²⁷ His first owner was Jeremiah Belknap, who later sold him to Lawson Buckminster. On the eve of the Revolution, Buckminster evidently agreed to Salem’s enlistment, which in effect served as his emancipation, since slaves were barred from service in the military. He saw action in a number of important battles, and, according to Temple, “there is a concurrence of testimony” to the effect that it was Salem who mortally wounded Major Pitcairn at Bunker Hill.²⁸ After his re-enlistment, he acted as “body servant” for the 6th Massachusetts regiment’s Colonel Thomas Nixon.²⁹ Following his participation in a

²⁴ Temple, 277.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 295, 320.

²⁶ Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections Since 1988, “John Trumbull Issue Depicts Peter Salem,” <http://esperstamps.org/aa6.htm> (accessed August 15, 2006).

²⁷ Brief accounts of Salem’s life are included in Temple, 324 - 327, as well as in Emory Washburn, *Historical Sketches of the Town of Leicester, Massachusetts, During the First Century from Its Settlement* (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1860), 266-69.

²⁸ Temple, 325.

²⁹ George Quintal, Jr., *Patriots of Color: ‘A peculiar Beauty and Merit’* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2000, 191.

number of significant battles, Salem was discharged and returned home to Framingham. He married Katy Benson, the granddaughter of a slave, and built a house in town. The marriage evidently did not work out. There is no record of any children born to the couple, and Salem eventually moved to Leicester, a small town in central Massachusetts.

The Leicester chapter of Salem's life tells the story of a modest war veteran, unsuccessful at farming, scraping out a living by caning chairs and weaving baskets.³⁰ Salem lived in a number of places around town until settling into a cabin he built himself on a winding country road. There he planted trees, vegetables, and roses, but he was not a successful farmer. His work as an itinerant basket weaver and chair caner, however, provided him access into the private homes of his neighbors, where he apparently was a welcome guest. Always mindful of his background in the military, Salem marched with a precise step and could frequently be seen saluting neighbors in passing "in return for the salutation or nod of recognition with which everybody greeted him."³¹ His colorful stories of his service in the war under "Massa Nixon" made him a particular favorite of the children of Leicester. When age inevitably caught up with him, and he was no longer able to support himself, the indigent Salem was sent back to Framingham, as was required by state law. He died there in 1816, having avoided the poor farm due to the intervention of his former owners who provided support "during his natural life."³²

Recognizing Salem's role in a defining event in United States history, both his hometown of Framingham and his adopted town of Leicester created permanent reminders of his service many years after his death. In 1882, one hundred years after the peace negotiations that ended the Revolutionary War, Framingham appropriated \$150, which was used to fill and grade the site of Salem's grave in the Old Burying Ground

³⁰ The Leicester Public Library maintains a file on Peter Salem which includes photos of now lost painted stones marking the site of his cabin and clippings heralding his place in history. A paper, "Houses Built in Leicester Previous to 1800," by Cora B. Knight Denny for the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, describes Salem's small cabin as "worthy of note."

³¹ Washburn, 268.

³² Temple, 327.

Cemetery and to put up a headstone with the following inscription: "Peter Salem, A Soldier of the Revolution, Died, August 16, 1816. Concord. Bunker Hill. Saratoga. Erected by the Town, 1882."³³ In the same year, the road in Leicester on which Peter Salem's cabin was thought to be located was named in his memory. In 1945 Leicester officially recognized Peter Salem Road as a town street.³⁴ In the 1950s, two new roads in the area were named Pitcaim Avenue and Bunker Hill Road, obvious reminders of Salem's participation in the Revolutionary War.³⁵

With such an obvious hero in Peter Salem and with his adopted home of Leicester so willing to create permanent reminders, why did Framingham instead choose Attucks to commemorate? The decision may simply have rested on the fact that Salem already had a gravestone in Framingham, and the more famous Attucks had no public memorial. When asked about the selection of Attucks over Salem, project coordinator Stephen Herring recently explained: "Crispus Attucks received priority attention from the commission due to his national stature in the Black History movement, and the fact that no memorial existed in the town to show its connection."³⁶ Well aware of Salem's historical significance, Herring had, in fact, suggested that another bridge, one located over Birchmeadow Brook near the veteran's former home, be named in his honor at a later date. After the Attucks project, however, the African-American Heritage Committee parted ways with the Framingham Historical Society, and momentum for a Peter Salem Bridge dissipated.

An additional factor in the selection of Attucks over Salem may be somewhat more complex and difficult to document. For those involved

³³ Report of Committee on Memorial Stone Over Grave of Peter Salem, 1882, Peter Salem File, Framingham Historical Society.

³⁴ Linda Rowdan (Assistant Town Clerk, Leicester, Massachusetts), in telephone conversation with the author, August, 2006.

³⁵ Joseph Lermerton (Leicester Historical Commission), e-mail message to author, July 16, 2006.

³⁶ Stephen Herring, e-mail message to author, May 31, 2006.

in the bridge project, the rebellious Crispus Attucks may have proved a more attractive hero to be celebrated at the close of the twentieth century than the dutiful Peter Salem. The latter earned his freedom by faithfully following the rules, while the latter broke them with reckless impudence. Salem enlisted in the military and acted as a loyal body servant to a White officer, whom he deferentially referred to as “Massa Nixon” in his later stories about the war. He chose a quiet means to earn a living, one that demanded cordial relations with his White neighbors. And when he was no longer able to work, Salem found himself at the mercy of the Leicester town fathers who packed him up and sent him back to the site of his enslavement, a place which undoubtedly held unhappy memories of his failed marriage as well as of his previous condition of servitude. Attucks, on the other hand, escaped his bondage, found work in the rough and tumble environment of Boston’s docks, and started a fateful fight with those perceived as oppressors. As iconoclast James Loewen reminds us in *Lies Across America*: “The images on our monuments and the language on our markers reflect the attitudes and ideas of the time when Americans put them up, often many years after the event.”³⁷ The plaque on Crispus Attucks Bridge notes that he “escaped in 1750 in search of his own freedom” and that he “was the first to die in the Boston Massacre, an event which initiated America’s struggle for independence from British rule.” Crispus Attucks is clearly an empowering hero for the twenty first century.

In debating the pros and cons of historical markers in the American Association for State and Local History’s publication *History News*, public historian Robert Weible makes a strong case in their favor.³⁸ While essentially agreeing with Loewen that markers can twist history to serve the agendas of politicians, local boosters, and business interests, he counters that program managers today are dedicated to the inclusion of women, people of color, and others neglected in the past and to setting the record straight. Furthermore, “historical markers can recognize subjects that hold meaning and value to the many people

³⁷ James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 36.

³⁸ Weible, “Historical Markers Are Groovy,” *AASLH History News*, 61, no. 1(2006).

involved with their conception and realization, and they can open public dialogues and provide opportunities for people to learn from each other.”³⁹ The Crispus Attucks Bridge project allowed interested parties in Framingham to erect a plaque to someone from the community who linked it to the broad story of the nation’s struggle for independence. The debate that erupted in the local newspapers was a healthy exercise in that it stimulated readers to consider the project and the express their opinions on its merits. Raising the issue of Peter Salem as a more suitable candidate for a bridge informed area residents about the role of a less well-known participant in the Revolutionary War effort and stimulated this author and Framingham resident, for one, to investigate further the local roots of both Salem and Attucks.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.