

# Building to a Revolution: The Powder Alarm and Popular Mobilization of the New England Countryside, 1774-1775

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**Abstract:** *This article explores a relatively unknown but significant event that illuminates the growing conflict between Great Britain and the American colonists. As a result of the Powder Alarm of September, 1774, the New England countryside underwent a popular mobilization. The aftermath of the Powder Alarm, seven months before the first battles at Lexington and Concord, heralded the coming outbreak of hostilities.*

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“War! War!” These emotional cries shattered the reserved decorum of the first Continental Congress meeting at Philadelphia in early September, 1774. The rumor of a possible British attack on Boston put a charge to the men who had gathered to coordinate a colonial response to recent Parliamentary actions known as the Intolerable Acts. Delegates from various colonies quickly assured the New England representatives that they would support the embattled province. John Adams was convinced that if the news had “proved true, you would have heard the thunder of an American Congress.”<sup>1</sup>

The rumor that threatened to embroil the English-American colonies in civil war emanated from a simple military maneuver undertaken by British

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<sup>1</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, Sept. 18, 1774. Edmund C. Burnett, ed., *Letters of the members of the Continental Congress I*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington 1921), 34.

troops stationed in Boston. On September 1, Thomas Gage, acting as Royal Governor in Massachusetts and Commander in Chief of the American colonies, sent a detachment of soldiers to secure and remove gun powder stored in Charlestown, Massachusetts. Conducted in secrecy, the operation proved to be a success, and by early afternoon all the powder had been removed to Castle William, securely guarded by the king's troops.

The following day, rumors about the operation circulated throughout New England and quickly ballooned to epic proportions. Many in the New England countryside heard that British troops had fired on a group of Bostonians and killed six. As the day wore on, the rumors were embellished to include a naval bombardment of the city that virtually leveled the seaport. One observer noted that "the news flew like lightning.... [In] about five or six days the Alarm spread thro' above a Million of People."<sup>2</sup> In New England alone, an estimated sixty thousand men mobilized, armed, and marched toward Boston fully intending to engage the English troops in battle. In the end, the rumor of war was disproved before the two sides collided.

Despite its failure to produce an actual clash of arms, the Powder Alarm of 1774 greatly altered future interactions between the New England colonists and British authorities. Because this event did not result in the opening salvo in the Revolutionary War, however, it has been largely overlooked by historians. Yet the Powder Alarm had significant and enduring consequences, particularly in the reactions of the country people of New England. These colonists resided outside the city of Boston in close knit communities consisting mostly of farmers and artisans. When the revolution finally came, these men formed the backbone of the early colonial army. Their actions in the months before, during, and following the Powder Alarm signaled, in a very public manner, exactly where this segment of the colonial population stood on the imperial controversy. Their impassioned response marked a turning point that eventually led to war.

Throughout the 1760s, the counties and towns around Boston had remained largely uninterested in provincial and imperial politics. Various non-consumption pacts drew these farmers briefly into a larger political struggle, but their concerns focused primarily on local town issues. The establishment of committees of correspondence, coupled with unpopular

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<sup>2</sup> Franklin Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (NY: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1901), November 17, 1774, p. 485. Following the Powder Alarm, Stiles spent more than two months compiling data regarding the event. While his political leanings favored the Whig cause, he provided the most thorough primary source accounts. He relied mostly on eyewitness accounts and newspaper reports. His diary is extensive and accurate.

actions by the British Parliament, gradually increased the local population's awareness of and resistance to imperial rule. These developments helped establish the groundwork that influenced the sentiments of the greater New England population. However, the widespread mobilization and community actions that occurred during the Powder Alarm proved the spark that solidified the resistance movement in the New England countryside. This event was certainly not the first popular New England uprising – Colonial America and England both possessed rich histories of crowd activity. What made the Powder Alarm of September, 1774 unique was the widespread and inclusive nature of the event. Furthermore, the revolutionary emotions that lingered following the event made possible a previously incomprehensible permanent split from England.<sup>3</sup>

Although many scholars mention the Powder Alarm, they typically treat it as a minor footnote on the road to revolution. The few studies that devote time to an analysis of the event do so mainly to emphasize its effects on non-participants, especially colonial and imperial leaders. These studies emphasize either the reactions of the Continental Congress and Whig leaders in Massachusetts, or General Gage and his troops.<sup>4</sup> Other historians stress the importance of the country mobilization, but explain it primarily through political means. While this approach is certainly important to understanding how the revolution came about, it fails to explain what motivated and solidified country resistance at the level of individual communities.<sup>5</sup>

This article examines the specifics of the Powder Alarm. In addition to recounting the particular details of the uprising, it identifies key aspects of the event that illuminate the perceptions and sentiments of New England's

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<sup>3</sup> Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), pp. 3-26; Pauline Maier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America", *William and Mary Quarterly (WMQ)*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ser. Vol. 27, No. 1, Jan. 1970, p. 3-35.

<sup>4</sup> David Ammerman, *In the Common Cause: American Response to the Coercive Acts of 1774* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974). Ammerman argues that the Powder Alarm reports precipitated a more militant stance from the congress eventually culminating in delegates' endorsement of the Suffolk Resolves. Robert Richmond's *Powder Alarm 1774* (Princeton: Auerbach Publishers Inc., 1971) is the only full length book devoted to the Alarm. Richmond focuses mainly on the elite Whig leaders' role in coordinating and controlling the response. David H. Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) presents the event as a wake-up call to Patriot leaders and shows how they responded following the event to facilitate better communication and coordination in future responses to troop movement culminating in the coordinated effort undertaken at Lexington and Concord in 1775.

<sup>5</sup> Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*; Richard Bushman, *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985) One study that proves an exception is Richard Gross's *The Minutemen and their World* (New York: Hill and Wang,

country population at this particular juncture in the resistance movement. I emphasize the mobilization in the towns and counties surrounding Boston and argue that the country people's increased agency and influence, both politically and militarily, are key features of the event. Unlike other studies, this article focuses on the community aspects of resistance, particularly how the people of various towns and counties came together in response to a shared threat, and how they bonded during that brief incident to a degree that made further resistance and revolution more likely, if not inevitable.

While the Powder Alarm was certainly not the most important event on the long road to American independence, it was a significant, highly revealing, moment on that march. The events of early September, 1774 marked a turning point for many in New England and increased their resistance to the mother country. The actions of that day and their persistent influence set the stage for the battles that initiated the Revolutionary War. It was no coincidence that those battles raged in the same vicinity and were waged by the same men who mustered in response to the Powder Alarm some eight months earlier. While the actions of early September did not mark the beginning of the War for Independence, they were key catalysts that made the war a reality.

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Tension characterized the mood of New England in 1774. The passage and implementation of the Coercive Acts earlier in the year had angered many, and the closing of the port of Boston by the British placed a terrible strain on the city's population. In response to the difficult conditions in Boston, aid continuously poured into the town from surrounding

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1976). Gross describes the coming of the Revolution from the vantage of the town of Concord. He emphasizes the solidarity the conflict created in the town during the 1770s. Residents united to fight for a common cause and left their individual and local concerns behind. While Gross briefly mentions the Powder Alarm, he does not examine it in detail. His work stresses local conditions in one town, but does not explain why the various towns and communities came together in a larger resistance movement at this specific moment. Likewise, he does not fully explain the community's increased militancy and wider political agency.

By far the most thoughtful examination of the Powder Alarm and the overall sentiments of the country people of Massachusetts can be found in Richard D. Brown's *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970). Brown, however, was more concerned with the Boston Committee of Correspondence's role in motivating the countryside. While he thoroughly examines the proceedings of the county conventions and the actions of various Massachusetts communities, he does not closely examine what the Powder Alarm meant and how that specific event helped to solidify the agenda and means for future rural resistance.

communities in Massachusetts. Whig leaders carefully acknowledged all of these donations. In particular, Samuel Adams sent notes of thanks in which he highlighted the injustice of the conditions.<sup>6</sup> In addition to closing the Boston port, Parliament also suspended the traditional governments of Massachusetts. Town meetings were prohibited and the provincial assembly was dissolved. The recently appointed Governor, Thomas Gage, was given the power to choose new officials. In response to the suspension of local governments, Massachusetts communities called county conventions. Because they were created after the acts were put in place, these conventions were not specifically prohibited.

As the months wore on and Massachusetts remained under the auspices of the new acts, tensions continued to rise. The Boston Committee of Correspondence continued to keep the surrounding communities abreast of the conditions within the city through the “ready pens of a (Joseph) Warren and (Benjamin) Church,” whose correspondence elicited both sympathy and outrage from colonists outside the city.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Governor Thomas Gage had the unenviable charge of implementing the controversial acts of Parliament while keeping peace within the colony. To facilitate his command, Gage was appointed both Governor of Massachusetts and Commander in Chief of the King’s American armies. This unusual joint appointment ensured that the political head of the province always had the support of the colony’s military apparatus. Gage quickly decided that the most prudent course of action was to implement the new acts while removing the province’s ability to resist them militarily.

In late August, 1774, Gage discovered an opportunity which he believed could limit the colonists’ ability to make war without raising their ire. While inventorying the powder and arms held in Massachusetts, Gage received a letter from Brigadier William Brattle of Cambridge. Brattle informed Gage that the surrounding towns were removing their powder from storage at the Charlestown powder house. All that remained was “the King’s powder only, which shall remain there as a sacred Depositum till ordered out by the Capt. General.”<sup>8</sup> Gage decided to do just that. The General reasoned that removing the powder would prevent it from falling into hostile hands and that the maneuver could be accomplished without

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<sup>6</sup> L. Kinvin Wroth, ed. *Province in Rebellion: A Documentary History of the Founding of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1774-1775* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) provides examples of notes of acknowledgment.

<sup>7</sup> John Pitts to Samuel Adams, October 16, 1774, Samuel Adams Papers, New York Public Library, (Microfilm Collection). Hereafter abbreviated as Adams Papers.

<sup>8</sup> *Boston Gazette*, September 5, 1774.

angering the population. Technically, the powder belonged to the king and could be stored wherever Gage saw fit. According to this rationale, the colonists had no grounds to resent its removal.<sup>9</sup>

The military maneuver to remove the powder commenced sometime between 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. on September 1, 1774. At the appointed hour, nearly 300 British soldiers left Boston for Charlestown. They arrived before dawn and patiently waited for the sun to rise. As soon as light allowed, they loaded all 250 half-barrels of gun powder and transported them to a fort on Castle Island in Boston Harbor. At the same time, a detachment traveled to Cambridge, secured two fieldpieces and transported them to the fort. The entire operation was completed that morning, and because it was conducted in secrecy, the troops met no resistance. Initially, it seemed everything had gone as well as Gage could have hoped, but events quickly proved otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

Discontent began that evening when colonists streamed into Cambridge and began to wonder what had transpired. As the hours pressed on, rumors and speculation took on a life of their own. Stories of soldiers firing on civilians and warships bombarding Boston spread quickly. Beacon fires, which had not been used since the French and Indian War, were lit by local residents to summon the surrounding country to action.<sup>11</sup> The following morning a crowd of approximately 4,000 gathered in Cambridge. Throughout the countryside, tens of thousands of men armed themselves and marched for Boston. According to one witness, they “were with difficulty persuaded to return and would not till from many Passengers from this way [Cambridge] they were convinced that there was no necessity for their assistance at this time.” The group that gathered in Cambridge did not disperse until they secured resignations and oaths from various officials in the town not to administer the new acts of Parliament.<sup>12</sup>

This brief chronology of the Powder Alarm foreshadows some of the event’s key features. First, the widespread mobilization of the country people for a common goal helped solidify the resistance movement by

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<sup>9</sup> A few days before ordering the troops to move, Gage lost the letter from Brattle. Some at the time believed this was intentional and Gage hoped to deflect any negative reactions onto Brattle. Following the Powder Alarm, Brattle published a public apology and explanation, but was so despised he was never again able to return to his home. Letters of John Andrews, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (hereafter abbreviated as *MHS*), (Boston: Wiggin and Lunt, Vol. VIII, 1864-1865).

<sup>10</sup> Primary accounts of the troop movement can be found in the *Boston Gazette*, Sept 5, 1774; Dexter, ed., *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* p. 477; Letters of John Andrews, *Proceedings of the MHS*, Vol. VIII

<sup>11</sup> *Boston Gazette*, Sept 5, 1774; Dexter, ed., p. 477.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Church to Samuel Adams, September 4, 1774, Adams Papers.

emphasizing the solidarity of a large population. The popular nature of the actions proved paramount. Second, the uprising contained a distinct political quality. The assembly at Cambridge focused on achieving political goals, not looting or vandalizing. Although the crowd was not violent, its underlying nature was undeniably militant. A closer analysis of the day's events highlights these key features.

The men of the New England countryside reacted immediately and in impressive numbers to the reports of an attack on Boston. Those who took arms in early September drew strength and validity from the unprecedented thousands of their neighbors who joined them in the community-wide uprising. One of the earliest reports came from Samuel Adams' protégé, Dr. Benjamin Church. On September 4, Church wrote, "The Inhabitants... had risen in one body armed and equipped and had proceeded on their march... to the number of Twenty Thousand."<sup>13</sup> Another estimate judged that "thirty thousand, or near perhaps more than one third of the effective Men in all New England took Arms and were on actual March for Boston." All but two counties in Connecticut mobilized and included "Twenty Thousand Men in Arms... marching or equipt for march towards Boston."<sup>14</sup> A distressed General Gage lamented that "the whole Country was in Arms and in Motion, and numerous Bodies of the Connecticut People had made some Marches before the report was contradicted."<sup>15</sup>

As the members of this spontaneous colonial army approached Boston, they passed inhabitants of other towns who spurred them on towards their goal. According to Ezra Stiles, one witness who "passed thro' the whole at the very time of the convulsion," noted that "all along were armed Men rushing forward some on foot some on horseback." Many communities surrounding Boston "scarcely left half a dozen Men in a Town, unless old and decrepid, and in one town the Landlord... was the only Man left." Marching toward Boston and an impending civil war, the men of the New England countryside were encouraged not only by their brethren in arms, but by the entire community. "At every house [there were] Women and Children making Cartridges, running Bullets, making Wallets, baking Biscuits... animating their Husbands and Sons to fight for their Liberties." Even after the men left their own homesteads, "Women kept on making Cartridges and after equipping their Husbands, bro't them out to the

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<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Church to Samuel Adams, September 4, 1774, Adams Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Dexter, ed., entries from Sept. 25, 1774. p. 457 and November 17, 1774. p. 484.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Gage to Lord Dartmouth, K.G. Davies ed., *Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783* (Colonial Office Series), (Dublin: Irish University Press, Vol. V, *Transcripts 1772, 1974*), p. 201.



Soldiers which in Crowds passed along and gave them out in handfuls.” In the eyes of this witness, “the Women surpassed the Men for Eagerness and Spirit in the Defence of Liberty by Arms.”<sup>16</sup>

The mobilization of the countryside of New England proved widespread not only in a geographic sense, but also inclusive of the entire community. This event represented a popular uprising that encompassed more than a localized, focused protest known to have occurred occasionally in New England’s history. Here was a widespread movement with a single shared objective: to fight for the common liberties of the body of people. Later, when a group of men discovered that the Alarm had passed, and the resignation of councilors in Cambridge was complete, they took the news “with apparent regret, grudging them (the men at Cambridge) the glory of having done something important for their country without their assistance.”<sup>17</sup>

The disappointment of this last group of New Englanders reveals another key feature of the Powder Alarm: its political component. Had the men who mobilized in response to the rumored attack on Boston simply dispersed upon learning that the crisis stemmed from a false rumor, it would be easier to dismiss their actions as reactionary and with no other purpose beyond aiding their neighbors in distress. This, however, turned out not to be the case. The majority did not consider their work complete until they had effected political change. In attempting to understand the political expectations of the men who marched on September 2, it is imperative to analyze the resolves of the county conventions held shortly before the Powder Alarm. An examination of these, coupled with the actions and demands leveled at Cambridge, provide a general overview of what the community hoped to achieve politically.

Of the three counties that held conventions before the Powder Alarm, the Berkshire resolves were the most moderate. They chose to promote a non-purchase/consumption agreement while simultaneously resolving to “observe the most strict obedience to all constitutional laws, and authority.” This seemingly harmless declaration was a clever means of protesting the recent acts of Parliament. By stating they would adhere to *constitutional* laws and authority, the Berkshire Convention implied that not all laws and authority were constitutional.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dexter, November 17, 1774. p. 480-481. This account came from an interview with a man identified only as Mr. McNeil.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Warren to Samuel Adams, September 4, 1774, Adams Papers.

<sup>18</sup> William Lincoln, ed. *Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775, and of the Committee of Safety, with an Appendix containing the Proceedings of the County*



While Berkshire County protested the new government indirectly, the Middlesex and Worcester conventions, held almost two months later, proved more explicit in their language. The Middlesex Convention declared that “these late acts, if quietly submitted to, will annihilate the last vestiges of liberty in this province, and therefore we must be justified by God and the world, in never submitting to them.” They concluded that anyone governing under the acts will have “forfeited their commissions, and (the people will) yield them no obedience.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the Worcester Convention resolved that “it is the indispensable duty of the inhabitants of this county...to prevent the sitting of the respective courts under such regulations as are set forth in the late act of Parliament.”<sup>20</sup> These resolves, passed just days before the Powder Alarm, clearly indicate the political goals of these counties. They did not challenge Great Britain’s sovereignty outright; rather, they specifically targeted the new and unpopular acts of Parliament.

The men who mobilized during the Powder Alarm carried these specific political goals with them on their march to Boston. The crowd of some three to four thousand who gathered at Cambridge called for the resignations and assurances of specific administrators, including Judges Lee and Danforth, Sheriff Phips, and Lieutenant-Governor Oliver, whose positions had been created under the new acts. When news of the Cambridge assembly reached Boston, a group of prominent radical leaders, including Dr. Joseph Warren and Dr. Thomas Young, rushed to the scene. When they arrived, they found “some thous[an]ds of people assembled before the Courthouse, and Judge Danforth stand[ing] on the steps declaring his resignation as a new Councillor. Judge Lee was also on the steps and declared his Resign also as a new Councillor.”<sup>21</sup> Lieutenant-Governor Oliver also resigned his position on the council and further “offer’d to renounce the Commission of Lieutenantcy if they desir’d it: but they told him to retain it by all means, that they did not wish for a better man to hold the second office in the Government than him.”<sup>22</sup> This last action revealed the political focus of those assembled. They were not there to force the resignations of men they did not like, or to question the authority of the royal government; rather, they assembled to illustrate their disdain for the new acts of Parliament

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*Conventions-Narratives of the Events of the Nineteenth of April, 1775* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838), p. 653.

<sup>19</sup> Lincoln, p. 613.

<sup>20</sup> Lincoln, p. 632.

<sup>21</sup> Dexter, November 17, 1774. p. 478.

<sup>22</sup> The Letters of John Andrews, *MHS Proceedings*, Vol. VIII, p. 353.

and to ensure that those acts were not carried out. Oliver was encouraged to continue in his former position, but not in his new post.

The actions and goals of the Cambridge protestors were certainly political in nature, but like everything that transpired during the Powder Alarm, they also reflected popular aspects. After the Boston committee, that group took over much of the political negotiations with the targeted officials. Although the Boston men took the lead, their deliberations did not prohibit the popular agency of those assembled. According to Ezra Stiles, “all was negotiated by the Committee but in the presence of the Body, the Committee communicating by the Officers Information thro’ the Lines, so that all knew what was transacting.” After Lieutenant-Governor Oliver signed his submission, it “was immediately handed along the lines and read publicly at proper Distances till the whole Body of the people were made to hear it.”<sup>23</sup>

Even though the Boston patriot leaders handled the negotiations with the councilors, the results of their deliberations were subject to the crowd’s approval. The crowd showed deference to their social superiors and allowed the Boston delegation to secure their political ends, but they also made it clear that they were to be a part of what transpired. According to Thomas Oliver, at one point “the populace, growing impatient, began to press up to my windows, calling for vengeance against the foes of their liberty.” Not until the protestors were assured through repeated public pronouncements that their political demands had been met did they conclude their actions.

The last key element of the Powder Alarm was the militant disposition of those involved. As in most conflicts, the interpretation of the participants’ actions lies in the eye of the beholder, and in this regard, the Powder Alarm was no exception. The objects of the people’s scorn reported a much harsher version of events than those who agreed with the protestor’s goals. For instance, a member of Thomas Oliver’s family recorded the following entry in his diary summing up his opinion of the crowd at Cambridge: “Mobs and Riots all this Summer – Wednesday the first of September I was mobbed.”<sup>24</sup> A more detailed, albeit secondhand, account of the crowd’s disposition of can be found in the journal of British Admiral Graves. He wrote that “they committed many outrages against those known or suspected to be well wishers to Government...no one could tell to what lengths the Rioters might proceed...” Graves claimed, “they seized the high Sheriff of the County and obliged him to save his

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<sup>23</sup> Dexter, November 17, 1774. p. 481.

<sup>24</sup> The Diary of Peter Oliver, p. 12, MHS.

life to sign an Obligation.”<sup>25</sup> Another observer recounted that “some of them had arms; many of them were heated with liquor, and he (Thomas Oliver) was in danger of immediate death.”<sup>26</sup> These descriptions give the distinct impression of a mob out of control and hovering on the verge of violence.

Patriot leaders, by contrast, portrayed a much more conservative gathering. Joseph Warren reported that when he and his companions arrived at Cambridge they “saw a fine body of respectable freemen.” Furthermore, he claimed they were “witnesses of their patience, temperance, and fortitude.”<sup>27</sup> Thomas Young, who arrived with Warren, said that when they approached they found “Judge Danforth was addressing perhaps four thousand people in the open air; and such was the order of that great assembly that not a whisper interrupted the low voice of that feeble old man from being heard by the whole Body.”<sup>28</sup>

Clearly, both sides depicted the actions of the crowd to correlate to their own expectations and desires. All nine county conventions held in 1774, whether before or after the Powder Alarm, included resolves that called for the suppression of riotous behavior. The New England colonists who resisted English authority knew that a positive public perception of their conduct was imperative to their hopes of ultimate success. The citizens of both England and America had to be convinced that their protest was justified and moderate. If the general public perceived the New Englanders as an unruly mob, few would come to their aid in times of distress. Still, the question remains: what was the true disposition of the crowd and the men who mobilized during the Alarm?

The answer to that question probably lies somewhere in the middle of the extreme views already recounted. Some protestors remained more reserved than others, but in general it seems that most physical and verbal confrontations were avoided. A good indication of the crowd’s disposition can be found in the reactions of the men targeted for resignation. Judge Lee observed after the event “that he never saw so large a number of people together and preserve so peaceable order before in his life.”<sup>29</sup>

The actions of Lieutenant Governor Oliver are even more telling. The crowd called on Oliver early in the morning on September 2, presented their grievances against the new acts, and demanded that he resign his

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<sup>25</sup> The Journal of Admiral Graves, September 2, 1774, MHS.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Hallowell to Cooper in Davies, p. 188.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Warren to Samuel Adams, September 4, 1774, Adams Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Young to Samuel Adams, September 4, 1774, Adams Papers.

<sup>29</sup> Letters of John Andrews, *Proceedings of the MHS*, Vol. VIII, p. 353.

new post. Oliver described this group as peaceful and respectable. He even agreed to travel to Boston and personally tell Gage that no troops were needed and the situation was under his control.<sup>30</sup> On the road to the capital, Oliver passed Sheriff Phips, a man involved in the crown's removal of the powder from Cambridge the previous day. When Phips "enquired of him about his situation if he went to Cambridge...lieutenant-governor assured him that they would not in the least molest or meddle with him."<sup>31</sup> The fact that Oliver was not only allowed to leave Cambridge, but felt comfortable to return, indicates that the gathering was not a raucous mob. Furthermore, the Lieutenant Governor confidently sent a man involved in the controversial event into the town with no fear for his safety. Later, it was reported that when Gage asked Oliver how many made up the mob, he replied that "they were not a mob by any means, but consisted of the leading men in the county and reputable substantial farmers."<sup>32</sup>

Following Oliver's return to Cambridge, the crowd continued to multiply. As their numbers increased, so did their demands. Oliver noted that many of the new arrivals were "of a lower class," and he "began to apprehend they would become unmanageable." Fearing for his family's safety, he finally resigned his post. With the ordeal at a close, Oliver observed that "they all marched off in their several companies wishing me well but cautioning not to break my promise." Even though Oliver was clearly intimidated by the end the day, no violence was directed toward him or his property. The potential for violence lingered throughout the day's events and probably increased as the crowd grew, but all of the resignations that occurred that day took place without any assaults.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, it was an emotionally charged atmosphere with thousands gathered on what was remembered as the hottest day of the summer. These elements led to cracks in the otherwise calm facade. One crack that quickly devolved into a gaping fissure occurred when Commissioner Benjamin Hallowell, a man not popular with the people, rode through Cambridge. "The sight of that obnoxious person so inflamed the people, that in a few minutes above one hundred and sixty Horsemen were drawn up and proceeded in pursuit of him in full gallop."<sup>34</sup> Most quickly gave up the chase, but a handful continued on his trail. Eventually, Hallowell was forced to abandon his chaise and flee on his servant's horse, brandishing

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Oliver to Earl of Dartmouth in Davies, p. 183.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Hallowell to Grey Cooper in Davies, p. 188.

<sup>32</sup> Letters of John Andrews, *Proceedings of the MHS*, Vol. VIII, p. 354.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Oliver to Earl of Dartmouth in Davies, p. 183.

<sup>34</sup> Dexter, p. 478.

a pistol to keep his pursuers at bay. The exhausted horse finally gave out within sight of Boston and the commissioner finished the journey on foot.<sup>35</sup> All told, the chase lasted to “within sight of the Piquets of the Guard at the Town Neck and it was with the utmost difficulty he got safe to Boston.”<sup>36</sup>

After arriving in town Hallowell claimed “he was pursued by some thous(an)ds which would soon be in Town and destroy all the friends of Gov(ernmen)t.” This report created a stir in Boston, and for a brief moment it seemed the troops might march on Cambridge. In the end, Gage decided against the action. Most likely, he was swayed by his earlier meeting with Lieutenant-Governor Oliver and trusted the latter’s judgment that the people were not violent.<sup>37</sup> Despite the decision not to march, word reached those assembled at Cambridge to the contrary. When the assembly heard that troops were coming, they did not disperse. Instead, they sent for their weapons which waited in a neighboring town. Eventually reports arrived confirming that the troops remained in Boston and would not be deployed. Learning this, the colonists returned to the business of procuring resignations.

The affair with Hallowell showed that the protestors could be rash in their actions. However, three other commissioners traveled through the area that same day, and none were accosted. It is possible that Hallowell was so disliked that his infamy single-handedly created this situation. It should also be pointed out that less than 200 of those assembled initially pursued Hallowell, and in the end fewer than ten continued the chase. Of the 3,000 assembled then, the vast majority ignored the commissioner.

Regardless of the mild disposition of the majority and their decision not to bring weapons to the town, the Powder Alarm was undeniably militant in nature. The tens of thousands who mobilized came armed and prepared to do battle. Later that month, Hannah Winthrop wrote from Cambridge, “The Assembled multitude lately at Cambridge with many other Circumstances give me a painful Idea of the Horrors of Civil War.”<sup>38</sup> Even Joseph Warren, who marveled at the composure of those assembled, noted that “had the troops marched only five miles out of Boston, I doubt whether a man would have been saved of their whole number.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Hallowell to Grey Cooper in Davies, p. 188.

<sup>36</sup> Journal of Admiral Graves, September 2, 1774, MHS.

<sup>37</sup> Dexter, p. 478.

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Warren, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being Chiefly a correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren*, Vol. I, 1743-1777 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1917), p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Warren to Samuel Adams, September 4, 1774, Adams Papers.

The significance of this militant uprising was obvious. The Yankees flexed their collective muscle and successfully achieved all they desired that day. Their success begged the question: Would they now return to their homes and allow the normal political players to do what they would with the situation? Or, would the actions of that day live on, and the agency they displayed continue in similar forms in the future? What was the enduring legacy of that impressive, if brief and ultimately unnecessary, mobilization?

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Following the Powder Alarm, New Englanders continued to press their demands in a popular fashion. When the Cumberland County Convention met at Falmouth on September 21, they first had to meet the demands of a gathering of citizens before they could commence their meeting. The local residents suspected that Sheriff Tyng planned to uphold the recent acts of Parliament. Tyng met with the delegates and signed an oath promising not to uphold the acts, but merely signing the oath was not enough to satiate the crowd, and Tyng proceeded to publicly read the statement before the “great numbers of the inhabitants of this county...now assembled near my house.” Tyng’s oath was very specific and partially reads as follows: “I further declare I will not, as Sheriff...or otherwise, act in conformity to, or by virtue of, said acts, unless by the general consent of the said county.”<sup>40</sup> After this public declaration, the protestors retired to their homes and the convention continued.

A similar gathering took place in Plymouth early in September when a new councilor was due to arrive at port. The people there “took the alarm...and near four thousand men were assembling to receive him.”<sup>41</sup> The councilor never arrived. Nevertheless, about a month later, on October 5, “the body of that county, to the number of about four thousand” assembled and “proceeded to make all the addressors and protestors there make a publick recantation.”<sup>42</sup> A full month after the Powder Alarm, the people of Plymouth still actively worked as a popular force to achieve their political desires. The widespread political agitation against the new acts of Parliament remained fresh. Residents of many New England towns continued to use their numbers to affect political change after the excitement of the Powder Alarm crisis had passed.

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<sup>40</sup> Lincoln, p. 656.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Young to Samuel Adams, September 4, 1774, Adams Papers.

<sup>42</sup> Letters of John Andrews, *Proceedings of the MHS*, Vol. VIII, p. 373.

This popular agency was not confined to Massachusetts alone, but included other New England colonies as well. During the Powder Alarm, many in Connecticut had mobilized and marched for Boston. Although the reports of battle were discounted before these men had a chance to act, the mobilization left a lasting effect there nonetheless. Two months after the Alarm, Reverend John Smailly of New Britain publicly condemned those who had mobilized. In response, “a Body of his neighbors the Sons of Liberty in that Vicinity were about to wait upon him. But he took horse and fled.”<sup>43</sup> Merely condemning the people’s mobilization during the Alarm sent a group to confront a man of the cloth in Connecticut.

Prior to the Powder Alarm there was some indication that the counties in Massachusetts planned to resist the new acts by force. When word arrived claiming General Gage planned to send troops to oversee the opening of the courts in conjunction with the new acts of Parliament, the Worcester convention voted to “purchase at least two pounds of powder...” and “... supply his neighbors fully.” They also decided to take an inventory of the guns in the county to determine how many were needed to “arm the people in case of invasion.”<sup>44</sup> One resolve, withdrawn after some debate, suggests that the convention’s militancy was vacillating. The aborted motion recommended that if troops were on their way to the area, the county’s inhabitants should “attend, properly armed, in order to repel any hostile force which may be employed.”<sup>45</sup>

When the Worcester courts opened on September 6, 1774, no troops bore witness to the event. Despite the absence of British regulars, more than six thousand residents of the county attended. County leaders assembled the people on the commons where they formed two lines arranged by their town of origin. The royalist judges at the session were required to walk between the lines and periodically read declarations of submission to the public will so that all in attendance could hear their resignations. Following this public ceremony, the convention recommended that all military officers resign their commissions; this way, they could be reinstated under the auspices of local governments. Later in the month, the convention passed resolves that created new plans for military organization, acquired field pieces, and established regiments of minutemen.<sup>46</sup>

The response of the people of Worcester indicates that the popular political and military actions of the Powder Alarm were not forgotten,

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<sup>43</sup> Dexter, p. 489.

<sup>44</sup> Lincoln, p. 634.

<sup>45</sup> Lincoln, p. 633.

<sup>46</sup> Lincoln, p. 635-640.



but continued to influence local affairs. Other county conventions in Massachusetts cited the Powder Alarm as justification for resisting the recent acts of Parliament and for increased military preparations.<sup>47</sup> For the first time, some of these conventions even spoke of the possibility of civil war for the first time.

It is a misconception to believe that at this time Boston's elite political leaders completely controlled the resistance movement. In fact, immense pressure was being applied on them from some of the delegates sent from the country towns to the Provincial Congress. A letter sent to Samuel Adams while he sat at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia informed him that the country people "do not remit of their fervour, and I am informed by a member of the Congress that the Boston Committee are by far the most moderate Men, and that it's the general opinion to erect a Government."<sup>48</sup> Another letter, this one from a prominent Bostonian sitting in the Congress, reinforced the sentiment. It claimed that "The Country is very uneasy, long they cannot be restrained. They urge us and threaten to compel us to desert the town they swear the troops shall not continue unmolested."<sup>49</sup> At this critical juncture, the country people of Massachusetts urged the establishment of a government separate from England. With New England's rural population stimulated by the events during and after the Powder Alarm, the resistance movement had quickly turned revolutionary.

The rural population was also influential in the Provincial Congress. In 1775, the Congress decided to organize their government under the old charter. This act essentially broke all ties to the royal government. The Provincial Congress next established Committees of Safety and Supply to oversee military preparations. Finally, many inhabitants left the town and briefly lived in the surrounding towns and counties. Of course, Boston was not burned to the ground as Admiral Graves feared, but the country population did confront British troops at Lexington and Concord in April of 1775.

The pressure applied by many of the country towns on the political leaders of Massachusetts at this time was critical. At this point, the radicalism in the resistance movement had shifted from the leaders to the people. No longer were the towns uninterested in imperial relations – now they were actively demanding and creating change. Patriot leaders had

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<sup>47</sup> See the resolves of the Essex and Suffolk county conventions, both of which cite the Powder Alarms as justification. These resolves can be found in Lincoln, pp. 616 and 602.

<sup>48</sup> John Pitts to Samuel Adams, October 16, 1774, Adams Papers.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin Church to Samuel Adams, September 29, 1774, Adams Papers.

labored during the previous decade to inspire New Englanders to resist ‘unconstitutional’ Parliamentary authority. In 1774, country dwellers latched on to that struggle in a dramatic fashion. Though many Patriot leaders only agitated for their rights as English citizens, the resistance movement quickly transformed into a revolution aimed at independence.

The political agency of the country people was also brought to bear on General Gage himself. This pressure is evident in a letter from participant John Adams:

The dispositions of the people in the Country are in general so restless, that they are continually sending Committees down upon one errand or other – which has caus’d the Governor say, that he can do very well with the Boston Selectmen, but the damn’d country committees plague his soul out, as they are very obstinate and hard to be satisfied.<sup>50</sup>

Gage’s correspondence illustrates that he was not only concerned by the recent actions of the people, but also quite surprised. In a letter written immediately following the Powder Alarm he claimed that, “the People are not held in high Estimation by the Troops, yet they are numerous, worked up to a fury, and not a Boston Rabble but the Freeholders and farmers of the Country.”<sup>51</sup> Ten days later Gage complained that “even places always esteemed well affected have caught the Infection, and Sedition flows copiously from the Pulpits.”<sup>52</sup> At the end of September, Gage’s desperation was evident when he wrote, “The Disease (colonial unrest) was believed to have been confined to the Town of Boston...now it’s so universal there is no Knowledge where to apply a Remedy.”<sup>53</sup>

The Powder Alarm and the popular actions following it greatly affected Gage. Before the Alarm, he planned to use his troops to ensure that the province of Massachusetts obeyed the new acts of Parliament. In fact, he had issued writs for the general court at Salem to meet on September 5, “but had hastily dissolve[d] ‘em before they meet by Reason as he said of the Tumults in the Province.”<sup>54</sup> Gage even went so far as to suggest that Parliament postpone the implementation of the acts until more troops could be sent to enforce them.

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<sup>50</sup> Letters of John Andrews, *Proceedings of the MHS*, Vol. VIII, p. 373.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Gage to Lord Dartmouth in Davies, p. 182.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Gage to Lord Dartmouth in Davies, p. 198.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Gage to Lord Dartmouth in Davies, p. 201.

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous Physician Diary, *Observations on the Air and Epidemic Diseases*, p. 5 (MHS).

Even though the Powder Alarm consisted of a singular event confined to two days, its effect on the future course of events in New England and America proved significant. The actions and lessons learned during that time energized the country people and hardened their resolve to resist English rule. The moves taken by General Gage and the British Parliament were intended to isolate Boston and reduce the provinces' ability to resist English rule. These efforts backfired. The acts mobilized New Englanders to resist the authority of Britain at all costs. Because the Powder Alarm of September 1774 did not result in the immediate clash of arms that initiated the American Revolution, it is easy to overlook its significance. Only by understanding its popular influence can we fully understand how the English-American population moved to open revolt against the mother country.