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# Jonathan Ashley: Tory Minister

Robert C. Coughlin

Popular history paints a rose-colored picture of the American Revolution. The fight for independence, it tells us, was one in which a unified country threw off the shackles of an unjust tyrant. While such stories make for interesting reading, their validity is questionable. The internal conflict between Whig and Tory was in some places as sharp as that which had compelled the newly-united colonies to take up arms against their former rulers.

The town of Deerfield was such a place. The Tory-Whig division there was sharp and bitter. The Tories, conservative loyalists with their values anchored in the past, favored remaining under British rule. The Whigs, on the other hand, favored an end to the connection with the British government, the natural rights of man, and greater liberty of thought and action. Such conflicting ideologies could not peacefully co-exist, even in a homogeneous society.

In eighteenth century Deerfield the town minister was a respected leader of the community to whom the populace turned for political as well as spiritual guidance. This would present a severe problem for a large segment of the population, as the citizens were largely Whig, and their minister, Jonathan Ashley, was a Tory. With zealous patriotism, he affirmed the necessity of an ordered world. Never a believer in the equality of man, he asserted "that each was only a part of the whole, with their place in society pre-ordained by almighty God. Their duty was to accept it."<sup>1</sup> These distinctions among classes were a necessary part of a workable social structure. Such an ordered system should be based on an authoritarian government, for Ashley believed that while there were good and bad kings, kings were essential. They were placed in power by God, whose command was binding on all Christians.<sup>2</sup> Expression of such thoughts inevitably led to conflict.

In March of 1766 the Stamp Act was repealed. Opposition to the Act in both the colonies and England (an American trade embargo had severely reduced English trade) had made the revenue it brought to the English treasury

insignificant compared to the trouble it caused. Its repeal was met with excitement and relief throughout the colonies. Reverend Ashley's sermon on July 29, 1766 reflected the feelings of most Americans about the Stamp Act and about King George III. The greatness of the House of Hanover, he said, was proven by the King's action. The King "had still retained the passion of a Father to his children." Ashley went on to describe the King and the members of Parliament as honorable people who had the colonists' best interests at heart. The Stamp Act was a mistake, Ashley admitted, which had been corrected as soon as possible.<sup>3</sup>

Following an eight year dormant period during which Deerfield was too involved with the problems of everyday life to worry about the "outside world," the year 1774 brought a resurgence of colonial awareness. It also marked the beginning of trouble for Jonathan Ashley because of his Tory beliefs. The passage of the Tea Act in March of 1773 and the Coercive Acts in 1774 alienated many colonists beyond reconciliation. Deerfield, like most Massachusetts towns, complied with the tea embargo, and while it was expected that some would continue to drink tea, it was hoped that the towns' leaders would set the proper example for the rank and file. Thus, Ashley's behavior in early July seemed all the more appalling. In open and flagrant violation of the embargo, he invited a number of Tory friends to afternoon tea. In addition, he dispatched his son to deliver a pound of tea to Mrs. Roger Newton, wife of Parson Newton of Greenfield.<sup>4</sup>

Such an affront to the colonists' battle for justice could not be overlooked, especially when it came from one who was expected to provide strength in the difficult times ahead. In the next town meeting, it was voted by a large majority to stop supplying Reverend Ashley with firewood.<sup>5</sup> The significance of such an act was twofold. First, it established the fact that Deerfield was a Whig town, which would only serve to make things increasingly difficult for Ashley if he continued to openly express Tory beliefs. Secondly, Ashley's response demonstrated the conviction with which he held his beliefs.<sup>6</sup> He never compromised or recanted. Yet, his role as minister provided some protection, while fellow Tories Seth Catlen and Phineas Nunn were "abused" on different occasions by Whig mobs led by Joseph Stebbins.

Through the summer and into the early fall, special emergency meetings of Tories were held at Ashley's house to discuss what should be done to ensure their personal safety. Out of these meetings came two substantial items. First, a non-aggression pact was signed between the leaders of both factions in hope of ending such "abuses" as were suffered by Catlen and Nunn. Secondly, in October area Tories formed a protection association under Colonel Timothy Ruggles of Greenfield. Among those who were members was, of course, Jonathan Ashley.<sup>7</sup>

On November 3, Ashley again was in the limelight. A fast called by the

Boston Committee of Safety was to be observed by religious services. John Lyman of Hatfield preached in the morning, and Rufus Wells, formerly of Deerfield and now of Whately, preached in the afternoon. Ashley, however, would have nothing to do with the entire affair, and declared that he firmly believed the Lord was on the side of the King, and that praying would be wasted time.<sup>8</sup>

The new year only served to make matters worse for the Tory population of Deerfield. On January 5, 1775, a Captain Bowen arrived from Boston and talked with Ashley and other Tories about the dangers facing local loyalists. He advised them to accompany them to Boston, the only place where Massachusetts citizens holding such sympathies could find safety. While Ashley felt that such advice may have been good for some, it was not for him; he decided to stay. Nothing short of ecclesiastical, as well as civil revolution, would unsettle him. He had publicly prayed for the King for over forty years and he was not about to change now on account of the Whigs and their "wicked rebellion."<sup>9</sup>

With each passing day the dislike for Tories increased. Following the Battle of Lexington, the Tories' hope was that somehow the British forces could reestablish authority, or that some sort of compromise would develop. The Tories had so alienated themselves from the general populace that if a reconciliation was not reached, only God knew their fate. The unfavorable climate of opinion did not seem to deter Ashley, however. As one story has it, shortly after the Battle of Bunker Hill, he predicted that the souls of the rebels who had fallen there would burn in hell. These remarks so angered one unidentified Whig that prior to Ashley's sermon on the ensuing Sabbath, he nailed the door to the pulpit shut. Unable to gain entrance to the pulpit, the parson asked the town blacksmith, who was in attendance, to open it for him. The blacksmith replied that he did not work on the Sabbath; Ashley was forced to preach from a temporary pulpit in front of the closed one, an embarrassing situation indeed.<sup>10</sup>

While there is some doubt about the veracity of this story, it does indicate the state of affairs in Deerfield. The minister, who had always been respected by the townspeople, was embarrassed in front of his entire congregation. During the next town meeting, the Whigs sought to add to his embarrassment, not only by withholding his firewood, but also his salary. Ashley was forced to sell a portion of his private property to buy needed firewood, which, thanks to some of his Tory friends, did not cost him too much.<sup>11</sup>

Hostilities intensified after May of 1775, and Ashley's enemies began to far outnumber his allies. Captain Bowen's warning about Boston being the only safe haven for Massachusetts Tories proved more accurate with each passing month. An example of this was an incident involving John Ruggles, a Tory who had a number of Deerfield friends with similar political beliefs. One day,

while entering the town on business, he was mobbed and expelled before he could complete his intended business. Another example was Colonel Israel Williams of Hatfield, a devout Tory and owner of a company that bore his name. He had long been suspected of enlisting men for General Gage, and in April enlistment papers were found on a person suspected of being Williams' agent. While no charges were levied against Williams personally, his "agent" was treated to the same Deerfield "hospitality" as had greeted Ruggles.<sup>12</sup> Both episodes served as messages that the Whigs would no longer tolerate the actions of Tories within the town.

Seventeen seventy-five was coming to an end, and so was the Whig dissatisfaction with Reverend Ashley. They were not satisfied with having taken away his firewood and salary, now they wanted him removed from office. On December 4, a town meeting was held and the first article on the agenda was whether the town should reconsider its responsibility of having to pay the minister's salary. The Tories managed to carry the vote, and his salary was again paid by the town, but not without protest from thirty-three Whigs. Although there were more Whigs than Tories in town, and although Ashley had alienated a great many of the citizens, many townspeople could not bring themselves to break the long-standing tradition of directly paying the minister out of tax funds.<sup>13</sup> The second article, more to the point, was whether under the "present circumstances," it would be desirable to keep Ashley as minister. No vote was recorded, but the town again agreed not to provide him with firewood.<sup>14</sup>

The significance of these actions should not be overlooked, despite the fact that neither served to alter the situation. The dismissal of religious leaders was not something to be taken lightly. Such a drastic step would have to result from an extremely severe offense, and evidently the majority of the citizens respected the office of minister and recognized Ashley's right to his personal opinion on political matters. The written protest by the thirty-three Whigs indicates that they wished to make it known to Ashley and others that they intended to continue their attempts to remove the minister.

The ever-widening political divisions between Whigs and Tories were made even more bitter through the church quarrel. Samuel Barnard was called before the church council for slandering Ashley, and it was decided to punish Barnard by removing his military commission. Anger at this action resulted in the withdrawal of some Whigs from the church.<sup>15</sup> A further alienation of Deerfield church members occurred when Ashley read the first Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1776. "God save the Commonwealth of Massachusetts," he read, but then he declared, "God save the King, too, I say, or we are an undone people."<sup>16</sup>

Time only served to intensify the already inflamed relations between the two factions. On December 12, 1776, Nathaniel Dickenson had his estate con-

fiscated and sold by the Whigs. The money from the sale went into the town treasury, and Dickenson fled to Canada.<sup>17</sup> A fellow Tory, Phineas Nunn, left Deerfield to join General John Burgoyne's army in upstate New York. Unfortunately for Nunn, by the time he reached Burgoyne's forces, they had been surrounded by the Continental Army, and like Dickenson, Nunn fled to Canada.<sup>18</sup>

Another Tory to fall upon hard times was Israel Williams, whose company had been caught attempting to buy English goods. He felt it was only a matter of time before the English reestablished control in the area; when they did he would have control of the economic market on the Connecticut River. His actions, however, were in violation of a written pledge that all area merchants had signed in 1775 promising non-consumption of English goods. He was taken to Boston and brought before the Governor's Council, which sentenced him to prison.<sup>19</sup>

Once again in early 1777 at a town meeting it was discussed whether Ashley should be removed from the ministry, and, as always, it was decided not to provide him with firewood. It was becoming an annual event for the Whigs to attempt to remove Ashley, and in each year the margin in Ashley's support grew smaller and smaller until it appeared only a matter of time before he was finally voted out of office.<sup>20</sup>

In 1780, the Whigs carried their battle further than ever before. On June 16, a council was set up to search for a new minister. While this was once seen as an anti-Ashley committee, one historian's research indicates that the committee's sympathy was evenly divided: three Whigs and three Tories.<sup>21</sup> The committee sat for ten days, but its proceedings are not to be found in either church or town records. Whatever its decision, it did not matter, for as he had for the past six years, Ashley managed to escape their wrath. He could not evade the Lord, however; in May of 1780 he became ill and he died in August of that same year.<sup>22</sup>

The process of healing the political wounds which had split much of Deerfield and Massachusetts in general, occurred more rapidly than one might have suspected. When Phineas Nunn was returned to Deerfield as a Tory spy he was set free and not imprisoned as had been expected. Another example was the case of John Williams, a Tory who was elected to the Provincial Congress early in 1781. Although the Whigs had twice prevented him from assuming his office, he was finally allowed to be Deerfield's representative soon after the war was over.<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Ashley, however, had died as he had lived, a loyal subject of King George III, proud of the fact that he had never given in to popular opposition or altered his views in any way.

## NOTES

These sources are all located in the Historic Deerfield Library.

1. Ms sermons of Jonathan Ashley, ms. 2332.
2. Stephen Graham, *Neighbor Against Neighbor* (Deerfield, 1961), p. 18.
3. Ms sermons of Jonathan Ashley, ms 2446.
4. Bruce McClellan, *Grapes and Thorns: A Study of Civil Conflict in Revolutionary Deerfield*, p. 7, unpublished and in Historic Deerfield collections.
5. George Shelton, *A History of Deerfield* (New Hampshire, 1972), p. 630.
6. Ashley never had to survive the winter without firewood. It was provided for him by a few close friends.
7. McClellan, *Grapes and Thorns*, p. 10.
8. Shelton, *History of Deerfield*, p. 684.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 694.
10. Ruth and Douglas Sackman, *Deerfield in Revolution and Rebellion* (Deerfield 1975), p. 17.
11. Graham, *Neighbor Against Neighbor*, p. 26.
12. Shelton, *History of Deerfield*, p. 703.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 710.
14. Deerfield Town Records, 1763-1794.
15. Shelton, *History of Deerfield*, p. 714.
16. Ashley's ms sermons, ms 2505.
17. Graham, *Neighbor Against Neighbor*, p. 27.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
19. Shelton, *History of Deerfield*, p. 715.
20. Deerfield Town Records, 1763-1794.
21. Shelton, *History of Deerfield*, p. 721.
22. Deerfield Town Records, 1763-1794.
23. *Ibid.*