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Fear of British Influence in Boston, 1783-1787

by Myron F. Wehtje

After the Revolutionary War, wary Bostonians were concerned about events that might undermine the independence and the republicanism of the new nation. Among other things, they were apprehensive about the continuing British influence in the town. Suspicious republicans thought that they detected numerous manifestations of British influence, and they were highly concerned about the return of loyalist refugees and the arrival of British merchants.

During the Confederation period, many Bostonians retained an inveterate hostility toward Great Britain. Some of them held such an attitude because they were convinced that the British had formed a conspiracy to ruin the newly independent nation. "Cato," for example, warned the townspeople in 1786 that enemies across the Atlantic were "plotting the destruction of your liberties." Other writers used similar rhetoric reminiscent of the decade before the war, when American whigs had suspected the British of conspiring against them. The returning loyalists and the "factors" for British mercantile firms would be agents of that conspiracy, it seemed, promoting trade disadvantageous to the United States, undermining public virtue, advancing episcopacy, and helping establish an aristocracy. The most dangerous of all, in the opinion of one Bostonian, were camouflaged loyalists. "Had we none but open Tories," he wrote, "we could defend ourselves, but it is the little foxes that spoil our tender grapes."¹

As a matter of fact, the same writer was among the many Bostonians objecting to the return of "open Tories." It has been estimated that members of five hundred Boston families had left during the war; now that the war was over, many of them wanted to return to Boston. For John Powell, living in Shropshire,

1. The Independent Ledger and the American Advertiser, June 20, 1785; "Cato," The American Herald, March 27, 1786.

England, the wartime exile had been a "long and painful separation." He hoped to return, and to see his mother "once more." Others were particularly interested in the possibility of regaining possession of property they had held before the war. Even before the agreement on preliminary articles of peace in late 1782, many refugees were earnestly seeking information about American attitudes toward Tories, and the prospects for their return to the United States. In England in the late summer of 1783, John Powell understood that many people in America had "unsettled minds with regard to the return of the absentees." He could only hope for "better things of my countrymen when men's minds became cool." Surely, he wrote, when the "sores are healed," a "more liberal . . . disposition will again break forth." From information reaching him, however, he realized that he might have to wait a while longer for the return of "peace, brotherly love, concord, and unity of hearts, with good government." John Gardiner, a firm whig, made a similar assessment when he wrote to his father, a loyalist: "Be assured, my dear sir, that no refugee can come here at present. It would ill suit you to be imprisoned and sent back in the winter."²

Until 1784 state legislation preventing the return of loyalist refugees remained in effect. That same year, a new law was enacted which allowed the governor and council to authorize the return of absentees who had not taken up arms against the United States or were not named in the Confiscation Act of 1779. Although there seems to have been considerable sympathy for the loyalists among Boston's elite, public opinion generally supported the existing laws. In April of 1783, the town meeting resolved that those who had been "refugees and declared traitors to their country" should "never . . . be suffered to return, but be excluded from having lot or portion among us." Numerous writers in the Boston papers breathed fire against the loyalists. One was persuaded that "As Hannibal swore never to be at peace with the Romans, so let every whig swear . . . never to be at peace with

2. Evelyn Marie Walsh, "Effects of the Revolution Upon the Town of Boston: Social, Economic, and Cultural (Ph. D. diss, Brown Univ, 1964), I, 93, 238; John Powell to Christopher Champlin, Aug. 30, 1783, Letters of John Powell of Boston to Christopher Champlin of Newport, Rhode Island (1763-1783), Baker Library, Harvard Univ.; John Gardiner to Silvester Gardiner, July 19, 1783, Gardiner Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

those fiends the refugees." He was determined to avoid the "contaminating breath of a tory." Although "Messalla" professed to have "no personal enmity" against any of the loyalists, he thought that they should be "forever excluded." He doubted that they could ever be good citizens of the United States. Another writer feared that the Loyalists might overthrow the American Republic, as the Restoration monarchs had overthrown the Commonwealth and ruined the English nation in the seventeenth century. Several writers emphasized the fact that Americans had achieved unity during the war; the return of the loyalists would "renew all the evils and confusions we have just survived." There would be "parties in civil dissension." "Mentor" warned: "We have yet enemies in our very bosoms, and more will every day slide in among us, who will use every artifice to format divisions, raise parties, and use every infernal engine in their power to effect what the arms of Britain . . . could not accomplish." One writer thought not only that it would be unsafe for the loyalists to return, but that the money derived from the sale of their estates was needed to pay off the public debt resulting from the war. "Brutus," who wrote a number of strong letters against the loyalists, was especially tenacious and uncompromising. In opposition to the argument that the return of the loyalists would enrich the country, he suggested that they might in fact gain a monopoly of trade, to the detriment of more patriotic citizens.³

Two cases in particular drew the attention of Bostonians at the close of the war. Thomas Brattle of Cambridge, the son of a loyalist merchant, was one of the principals. When he petitioned the legislature for permission to return to the state, a major debate ensued. Boston's representatives, led by the influential Thomas Dawes, were prominent among those voting to grant Brattle's

3. Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Passed by the General Court, A. D. 1783 (Boston, 1783), p. 11; Joseph Willard, "Naturalization in the American Colonies," M.H.S., Proceedings, IV (1858-1860), p. 359; A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1778 to 1783, vol. 26 of the Reports of the Record Commissioners of Boston (Boston, 1895), p. 306; The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser, May 22, 1783; "Sydney," The Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal, March 1, 1784; "Messalla," The Boston Evening-Post and the General Advertiser, Feb. 22, 1783; Independent Chronicle, May 1, 1783; "Mentor," Evening-Post, May 3, 1783; "Half a Million," Ind. Ledger, May 12, 1783; "Brutus," Evening-Post, April 19 and May 10, 1783.

petition. The lower house, however, defeated it. In the accompanying newspaper debate, "Messalla" argued that there was no justifiable reason why Brattle should be allowed to return. He must be considered a British subject, and his property had become a part of the "common property of the people." In response, one of Brattle's supporters pointed out that Brattle had left for London before the beginning of the war, that he left as a friend of America, had remained one, and that during the war Brattle had done nothing to aid the enemy. In fact, he had helped American prisoners, securing the release of some and providing for the feeding of others.⁴

The case of John Temple attracted even more attention, for it was involved in the Hancock-Bowdoin rivalry. Temple, the son-in-law of James Bowdoin, had gone to England in 1779, by his own account for the purpose of enlightening the people there concerning the American position. When temple returned to Boston in late 1782, state authorities and others suspected him of treason. Of course, the fact that John Hancock was governor complicated the case. In attempting to clear his name, Temple secured letters of testimony from several prominent Bostonians, including Charles Chauncy and Samuel Cooper, the pastors of the First Church and the Brattle Street Church, respectively. The opposition, however, led by James Sullivan, an able member of the Hancock faction, was relentless. The attorney-general, Robert Treat Paine, regarded this as a "political question" beyond the scope of the judiciary. The legislature and executive branches, then, had to resolve it. After first acting in Temple's favor and failing to get Hancock's concurrence, the General Court voted in March of 1783 to leave the matter to the governor and the council. That action, of course, did not satisfy Temple; he wanted a "fair and impartial trial before a proper tribunal." After Bowdoin sent a memorial to each house of the legislature, Temple was finally granted a hearing. Sullivan presented the charges against him, and Temple replied to them.⁵ The final decision

 4. Van Beck Hall, Politics Without Parties: Massachusetts, 1780-1791 (Pittsburgh, 1972), p. 140; Independent Chronicle, March 6, 1783; "Messalla," Evening-Post, Feb. 22, 1783.

5. "A Third Bostonian," Ind. Ledger, Sept. 15, 1783; [John Temple], As the Public Have Had Much Writing and Many Studied Falsehoods Laid Before Them,

seems to have remained with the governor, and, characteristically, he delayed. Apparently despairing of success, Temple and his family sailed for England in the fall of 1783. A writer in the *Independent Ledger*, taking note of the departure, accused an "envious and malicious faction" of standing in Temple's way, even though he had been "uniformly" a "faithful friend of this his native country." Curiously, about a year and a half later Temple was appointed to serve as Great Britain's consul-general in the United States. That appointment prompted new speculation as to his true allegiance in the past.⁶

George Spooner was one of the less celebrated absentees who had an experience similar to those of Brattle and Temple. On the recommendation of physicians, he had left Boston during the British occupation. While he was in Nova Scotia, the British evacuated Boston; subsequently, a law was passed forbidding the return of absentees. In the spring of 1783, Spooner wrote to the attorney-general of Massachusetts for assistance in securing permission to return to his hometown. Spooner insisted that he had done nothing to "prejudice my countrymen against me." Among other things, he hoped to return so that he might visit his elderly parents. Apparently there was little that the attorney general could do for Spooner. Men such as he, Brattle, and Temple were regarded not only as members of a faction that had been disloyal during the war, but also as part of an aristocratic faction that would endanger the new republican society of the United States.⁷

Archibald McNeill, a baker who had left Boston during the British evacuation of 1776, almost certainly had no aristocratic pretensions, but he was arrested nevertheless after his return to the town in February of 1784. Released the day after his arrest, he was ordered by Governor Hancock to leave the state. While McNeill set out for Quebec, there was renewed discussion of the return of the loyalist absentees. "Impartialis" agreed that vigilance

Concerning Mr. Temple; the Following Plain Statement of Facts and Dates, Will Enable that Public to Form a Right Judgment upon His Case (Boston, 1783).

6. *Ind. Ledger*, Nov. 24, 1783; "Horatio," *The Massachusetts Centinel*, April 16, 1785. For Sullivan's mild reaction to Temple's appointment, see James Sullivan to Rufus King, Jan. 29 1786, James Sullivan Papers, MHS.

7. George Spooner to Robert Treat Paine, March 12, 1783, Robert Treat Paine Papers (1783-1787), MHS.

was necessary, but he could not understand the clamor over McNeill, a relatively unimportant person. Writing in the *American Herald*, "Impartialis" asked if there were not "more notorious offenders who deserve the public attention." He specifically had in mind John Clark, the physician who had recently returned to Boston. According to the writer, Clark had taken up arms against the United States, while McNeill apparently had not. Another writer, who agreed that Clark ought to be sent away, vigorously denied the insinuation that Clark was in Boston because "British influence, if not British gold," had "defiled the hands of justice." He asked his readers to remember that it would be a mistake to draw a fixed line with regard to the absentees, lest some return "who deserve not to breathe the air of freedom, while others are excluded whose criminality of heart is trifling." Another writer reminded the townspeople that the treaty of peace required the readmission of absentees. However, he thought that they should be readmitted as aliens, with no political rights.⁸

By the spring of 1784 discussion of this question had subsided. Former refugees gradually became more numerous, more visible, and more acceptable. In late May, Isaac Winslow, a returned loyalist, remarked that although he was scowled at, he had no fears of "a mob." A few months later he was confident that hostility to loyalists would "daily die away more and more." He expected some outbursts but thought that they would be "fainter and fainter." In October of 1784, a writer in the *Boston Gazette* expressed his indignation at the visibility and activity of men like Winslow. He had not expected "so soon to see them return and parade our streets." The same writer also complained of the loyalists' initiating lawsuits, trying to remove a "worthy officer of this town" from his position, and attempting to force out of business a man who opposed them. He predicted that the returned loyalists would

sap the very foundation of our happy constitution.
They will continually be increasing in opulence
and, by degrees, creep into power and places of

8. On McNeill and Clark, see *Am. Herald*, Feb. 9, 1784; *Ind. Chron.*, Feb. 12 and 26, 1784; "Impartialis," *Am. Herald*, Feb. 16, 1784; and "Commonwealth's Man," *Am. Herald*, March 1, 1784. For later discussion of the loyalists' coming, see *Ind. Chron.*, March 4, 1784.

trust, till at last they will destroy all the influence of the true friends of America.

A few months later "The Observer" commented on the ex-refugees that he saw "insolently patrolling those streets they would have deluged in a torrent of blood." When a shopkeeper who had returned from Nova Scotia was threatened in the spring of 1785 with tarring and feathering at the hands of the "Mohawk Indians," such talk had a hollow sound. It was also much more likely to be countered in public than had been the case earlier in the period. In the summer of 1785, "Impartialist" spoke out against the "pains . . . taken by a few desperate, disappointed persons in this metropolis to breed dissensions among the people . . . when all ought to be united." He charged them with bringing the town close to "anarchy and confusion." In late 1785, the General Court at last repealed all acts standing in the way of the absentees' return to Massachusetts.⁹

Animosity finally subsided to the point that Massachusetts could come into line with the spirit of Article Five of the peace treaty. One writer thought that the refugees should still be excluded, but if they were not, he hoped at least that they would be disqualified from holding important offices of the state. "Brutus" insisted that Article Five was only a recommendation to the states; they were not required to readmit the refugees. Holding that the returned refugees were already actively seeking reunion with Great Britain, he believed that no more of them should be readmitted. "Brutus" feared that "a few sly, insinuating individuals may more effectually answer the purposes of destroying our union than an army of soldiers." Such fears were groundless, wrote "Obliviscor." He was certain that the refugees were no threat to the public safety. Moreover, he held that the honor of the country was at stake in dealing with the absentees; the recommendation of Congress must be fulfilled. In his opinion, Massachusetts had nothing to gain by "perpetuating mutual enmities and animosities," as "Brutus" was doing. "Obliviscor"

9. Isaac Winslow to Polly Winslow, May 28, 1784, and to Benfamin Davis, Sept. 14, 1784, Winslow Papers, MHS; "An Unshaken Whig," Boston Gaz., Oct 4, 1784; "The Observer," Mass. Cent. Feb. 9, 1785; "A Mohawk," Am. Herald, May 9, 1785; "Impartialist," The American Journal and Suffolk Intelligencer, July 12, 1785; Mass. Cent., Nov. 19, 1785.

hoped that it would be possible to "cement all the subjects of the state together." His viewpoint, looking to the future, would prevail; that of "Brutus," looking to the past, by the end of 1785 already seemed outdated to many Bostonians.¹⁰ While concern over the return of loyalist refugees was declining in 1784 and 1785, apprehension over the presence and flourishing business of British factors was increasing. In the fall of 1784 one writer commented in a long letter on their enmity for America. Lacking any regard for the welfare of the country, they were "only pursuing their own interest," he charged. By the spring of 1785 there was a crescendo of comment in Boston on the activities of the British factors. "Lucius" thought that they aimed only "to enrich themselves, to the ruin of this country." Additional factors must be discouraged from coming he said, before they gained a monopoly of all business in town, ruining the local merchants and making Americans "slaves to British merchants." Another writer described the factors as "enemies who are sucking our blood." Some Bostonians hinted that the factors would be in peril if they remained in town. "Our moccasins, our blankets, and our tomahawks," wrote one townsman, "are as good as when we destroyed the tea and drove away the tea merchants." There were others, however, who urged caution. "A Bostonian," while agreeing that the "swarm of British factors" must be evicted, urged his fellow townsmen to be careful about the means that they employed. Another writer warned against "mobs and riots." He did not want Bostonians to "stain our character," but to "behave with firmness and dignity."¹¹

In April of 1785, there was talk of a town meeting or some other public meeting to discuss the matter of the factors. A writer in the *Exchange Advertiser* wanted a town meeting so that the British factors, "Those miscreants," could be ordered in the name of the town to leave Boston. "Brutus" favored a town meeting so that a committee could be selected to visit the stores of the factors to ask them to leave without delay. There was no

10. "Uniformity," *Ind. Chron.*, Dec. 16, 1785; "Brutus," *Ind. Chron.*, Dec. 29, 1785; "Obliviscor," *Ind. Chron.*, Jan. 5, 1786.

11. "A friend to Commerce," *Ind. Chron.*, Oct. 14, 1784; "Lucius," *Ind. Chron.*, March 31, 1784; "Thousands," *Mass. Cent.*, April 6, 1785; *Mass. Cent.*, April 9, 1785; "A Bostonian," *The Exchange Advertiser*, April 8, 1785; *Mass. Cent.*, April 13, 1785.

town meeting in April to discuss the factors, but on the evening of the fifteenth, a group of merchants, traders, and "many other gentlemen" met at the Bunch of Grapes Tavern on State Street to "consider what discouragement should be given to the British factors who were residing here and monopolizing to themselves the benefits of commerce." John Hancock presided over the meeting, which adjourned after a committee was chosen to draw up a plan of action. The following day the group met again--this time at Faneuil Hall. The plan it finally adopted evidently called for the use of peaceful persuasion. "A Soldier" wished for more "animated exertions; factors should be driven away and their "treacherous allurements" burned." Perhaps this writer was involved in a near-riot that the sheriff suppressed on the night of the meeting at the Bunch of Grapes. The various forms of public pressure seem to have caused many, if not all, of the factors to close their stores for a time. And there were reports that Richard Whackum and Company, reputed to have sold goods "cheaper than any other person," were "packing up their goods" and preparing to leave on the first available ship. The printer of the *American Journal* was one of many townsmen who applauded the imminent departure of the State Street firm.¹²

Many of the factors simply waited out the storm. By the end of April, one writer was complaining that some "well known characters and ladies" had encouraged the reopening of the factors' stores, which were in fact reopening "by degrees." "Brutus," who wanted no longer "to threaten, but execute, favored the publication of the names of the factors who "with the most consummate arrogance daily violate our resolutions." It soon became evident, however, that the factors did not intend to leave. In fact, some received fresh supplies, according to a report in the *American Herald*. This brought on new attempts in the town's papers to rouse the citizens to action against the factors. Some Bostonians, of course, deplored the agitation as much as they opposed the harassment of the loyalists. They reminded the townspeople that the factors had a legal right to reside and trade

12. "Joice, Jun'r" Exch. Advert., April 8, 1785; "Brutus," Mass Cent., April 13, 1785; Boston Gaz., April 18, 1785; "A Soldier," The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser, April 21, 1785; "Hortensius," Exch. Adver., April 21, 1785; "An American Merchant," Ind. Chron. March 31, 1785; Mass Cent., April 16, 1785; Am Jour., April 19, 1785.

in the town. One writer thought that a "friendly private admonition" was the only proper means of opposing the factors. "Civis" did not doubt that the return of the loyalists and the trade of the factors were "alarming evils," but he regretted the "declamations tending to rouse the people to. . . acts of violence." Legal remedies, he was persuaded, must take the place of "this intemperate zeal."¹³

After the spring of 1785, interest in the factors cooled, evidently in part out of a sense of futility. Occasional letters show, however, that the presence of the British was a continuing matter of concern to some Bostonians. In the summer of 1786, "Tribunus" called for a "scrupulous vigilance over the subtle designs of British strangers and their friends." He said that they were multiplying and spreading the "poison of their principles." Another writer was concerned over the foreclosures instituted by British factors and their agents. By the time of his writing, the rumblings of the background to Shays' Rebellion could be heard. More than a few Bostonians attributed the insurrection to British influence, including the activities of the factors among them.¹⁴

In post-Revolutionary Boston rejoicing over independence was quickly tempered by anxiety over the fragile state of the new nation. Many of the town's vocal citizens expressed their concern about various perils confronting republican America. The presence of British sympathizers, including returned loyalists and newly arrived British traders, seemed to some to be among the gravest of those perils. Antipathy to the loyalists and the factors diminished during the latter years of the Confederation period, but it did not disappear. For many years after the close of the period, hostility and other evidences of Anglophobia would be prominent in republican Boston.

13. "Observer," Mass. Cent., April 30, 1785; Mass. Cent. April 16, 1785; "Brutus," Mass. Cent., April 30, 1785; "New-England Men," Am. Herald, May 9, 1785; "T," Mass. Cent., April 9, 1785; "Civis," Ind. Ledger, April 11, 1785.

14. "Tribunus," Mass. Cent., July 26, 1786; "Samuel," Exch. Adver., July 27, 1786.