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The Ideal of Virtue in Post-Revolutionary Boston

Myron F. Wehtje

In the course of the Revolution, Americans came to recognize themselves as a new nation. Inevitably, this recognition produced a great deal of self-examination. On one hand, as Americans compared this new nation with the British empire, they viewed themselves as a "new, fresh, vigorous, and above all morally regenerate people." On the other hand, recurrent jeremiads reminded the revolutionaries of their depravity. American self-consciousness did not end with the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. After 1783 Americans continued to look closely at themselves. The seriousness of this introspection was bound up with their earlier vision of themselves as history's saving remnant of liberty. They had thought of themselves as standing "side by side with the heroes of historic battles for freedom and with the few remaining champions of liberty in the present." Now that independence had been won, Americans were challenged to ask themselves if they had the national character to defend successfully the "battlements of liberty." Their earlier doubts, which had led to what Gordon S. Wood called a "utopian effort to reform the character of American society," were magnified by the self-searching of the postwar period. Prominent in their thinking, of course, was the realization that throughout history beacons of liberty had fallen because their foundations of virtue had eroded. Did the same fate await the emerging American Republic?¹

1. See Winthrop Jordan's discussion of "Self-Scrutiny in the Revolutionary Era," in White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill,

New Englanders could be expected to be in the forefront of the self-scrutiny of the Confederation period. Since the founding of the New England colonies, the people of the region had been examining their souls and their society, measuring themselves against both a religious and a secular mission. For the past two decades New Englanders had been absorbed in revolutionary activity, breaking their ties to Great Britain, establishing a new nation, developing a sense of national purpose. Perhaps more than other Americans, they had experienced what Winthrop Jordan calls a "revolution in the expectations of Americans concerning themselves." Now that the war was over, New Englanders might be expected to lead the way in reviewing the expectations of the Revolution and comparing them with the realities of the Confederation period. As they did so, Wood suggests, many New Englanders saw themselves as the new nation's "last bastion of devout republicanism." In the 1780s, Boston remained the center of thought in New England. It is important, then, to consider what Bostonians were thinking about the implications of the Revolution, about republicanism, about themselves.²

When a Boston woman wrote in the spring of 1784 that the "prosperity of a republican government greatly depends upon the virtue of its citizens," she was expressing an idea shared by many Bostonians of the Confederation period. In another Boston newspaper of the same date, "Sidney" declared that "Virtue alone should be the ruling principle of republics." "Aristides" wrote a

N.C., 1968), pp. 267-311. The Americans' view of themselves as exemplars of virtue and champions of liberty is presented by Bernard Bailyn in The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, 1969), especially pp. 160-161. Also see H. Trevor Colbourn, The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1965). The self-doubts of the revolutionaries are discussed by Perry Miller, "From the Covenant to the Revival," in James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., The Shaping of American Religion (Princeton, N.J., 1961), I: 322-350. Gordon S. Wood's study is The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969), especially p. 395. For additional background information, see Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritan Ethic and the Coming of the American Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., XXIV (Jan. 1967): 3-18; and Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., XXXIX (July 1982): 401-441.

2. Jordan, White over Black, p. 311; Wood, Creation of the American Republic, p. 421.

year later that it was a maxim that virtue was "essential" to the "existence" of a republic, and Jonathan Loring Austin, the son of Benjamin Austin, a leading rope manufacturer, said in his oration on July 4, 1786, that "no nation" could remain free for long "after it has lost its virtue." In the Fourth of July oration given in Boston in 1783, John Warren said that the absolute necessity of virtue for the existence of republicanism had been "sufficiently proved by the ablest writers on the subjects." What Warren had in mind were specific examples of republics, from antiquity to the late eighteenth century. As was common for public speakers of his day, Warren declaimed about the fall of ancient republics, such as Athens, Carthage, and Rome, after they had lost their virtue. But he also pointed to Venice and Switzerland as examples of republics that endured because of their virtue.³

In the eighteenth century the word "virtue" had a number of different meanings and implications. One of the most important was simply patriotism. "Aristides" thought of virtue as "love of the republic, its nature, principles, and laws." To Dr. Warren, virtue was love of one's country. He also referred to virtue as "public spirit" and suggested that it was the "spirit which gave our Independence birth." When John Gardiner, a lawyer, gave the town's Independence Day oration in 1785, he described public virtue as a "strong sense of our interest in the preservation and prosperity of the government of which we are members." Other townsmen regarded virtue as an "ardent desire" to promote the public welfare, and "love of the good of the town." Warren thought that one of the ramifications of patriotism was "solemn veneration" of the country's laws, and Gardiner was one of several who associated it with public justice. In an election sermon delivered in Boston in the spring of 1785, William Symmes preached that the "very existence of free republican states depends

3. Boston Gazette and the Country Journal, April 5, 1784; "Sidney," Independent Ledger and the American Advertiser, April 5, 1784; Oration Delivered July 4, 1786, at the Request of the Town of Boston, in Celebration of the Anniversary of American Independence (Boston, 1786), p. 7; John Warren, An Oration Delivered July 4th, 1783, at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, in Celebration of the Anniversary of American Independence (Boston, 1783), pp. 6, 9, 16, 17.

upon the reign of justice." He also linked the cherishing of civil and religious liberties with the idea of virtue.⁴

Morality was also incorporated in the meaning of virtue. Symmes said in his sermon that a virtuous people would have "moral worth." A writer in the *Boston Gazette* coupled morality and patriotism in explaining the meaning of public virtue. Bostonians, with their religious heritage, had no difficulty in identifying the proper basis of morality. Writers and orators referred to the importance of reverence for God, as expressed in public worship and the proper observance of the Sabbath. The town meeting of May 13, 1783, stated in its instructions to the town's representatives in the General Court that the "preservation of good government essentially depends upon piety, religion, and morality." The townspeople held that these qualities could not "be generally diffused among a community but by the institution of the public worship of God." Bostonians believed that religion would nurture personal morality, which in turn would contribute to the public morality that helped to identify a virtuous people. At least one minister was convinced that much work remained to be done to make religion a wellspring of morality; as evidence of what he described as a "vast declension in religion," he pointed to the fact that only one-fourth to one-third of the inhabitants of Boston attended church at any one time. Of course, Bostonians recognized other sources of morality besides religion. "A Consistent Republican," writing in the summer of 1785, thought, for example, that the principles of good education also would be helpful, along with religion.⁵

4. "Aristides," *Boston Gazette*, May 23, 1785; Warren, *Oration*, pp. 7, 8, 32; John Gardiner, *An Oration, Delivered July 4, 1785, at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, in Celebration of the Anniversary of American Independence* (Boston, 1785), p. 8; "Independent," *Boston Gazette*, April 3, 1786; "A Salary Man," *American Herald*, June 27, 1785; William Symmes, *A Sermon Preached before His Honor Thomas Cushing, Esq., Lieutenant-Governor, the Honorable the Council, and the Two Branches of the General Court . . . May 25, 1785* (Boston, 1785), pp. 10, 16.

5. Symmes, *Sermon*; "Independent," *Boston Gazette*, April 3, 1786; Warren, *Oration*, p. 32; *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), pp. 312-314; "Sermon Preached at the Old South, May 15, 1783," ms., Early Sermons, in *Massachusetts Historical Society*,

Besides patriotism and morality, another quality associated with virtue was simplicity. The country's greatest need, thought one writer in 1785, was the recapturing of "that amiable innocence and simplicity of manners which engendered the noble spirit of independence that emancipated this country." Later in the same year, another writer called for the "restoration of that simplicity of manners which hath heretofore been our glory and our strength." By simplicity of manners these writers seem to have meant unostentatious dress, decent behavior, an unaffected manner, prudence, sobriety, and perhaps above all, frugality. As hard times pressed heavily on the town, frugality was frequently mentioned as an important aspect of public virtue.⁶

Bostonians perceived that the greatest danger to virtue, and consequently to republicanism, was luxury. One townsman thought that luxury represented a greater threat than even armed invasion. John Andrews wrote in his commonplace book that luxury had "always proved pernicious wherever it has prevailed." He blamed it for the "decay" of nations. John Warren agreed, pointing out that luxury threatened the "total loss of liberty and patriotism." If luxury were to abound, writers such as these saw no way for Boston or the nation to escape its effects. That "baneful and destructive disease of the body politic," as John Gardiner called it in his oration, had "even proved, and ever will prove, fatal to public virtue." No state, he said, had ever withstood the "deadly streams of universal luxury." When Gardiner spoke those words in 1785, he did not view luxury as a distant abstract evil that the people of Boston must keep from their town. It was a present reality, he and others believed. In fact, as "Sans Six Sou" wrote that same year, "they who have seen other countries do not hesitate to assert that the Bostonians, all things considered, are at present the most luxurious people they have seen." The following year a young observer bemoaned the "woeful extravagance of the times." The newspapers of the period echoed with many other laments of the prevalence of

Boston; "A Consistent Republican," Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser, July 21, 1785.

6. Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser, July 7 and September 29, 1785. On simplicity of manners, see especially Gardiner, Oration, p. 8; "A Patriot," Massachusetts Gazette, August 22, 1786; and "A Consistent Republican," Independent Chronicle, July 21, 1785.

extravagance. But not everyone concurred with these gloomy assessments. There were suggestions that the critics of luxury and extravagance saw things from a distorted perspective. One writer doubted that the "great body of the people" were "more extravagant" than they had been before the war. "Lothario" contended that neither the "theoretic republican" nor the "sagacious politician" could "prevent the increase of luxury." Its development was inevitable, he thought, in a state that lived by commerce. A week later, "Lothario" argued further that some good might come from luxuries; they could "file off the rough excrescences" of society and give it an "additional lustre."⁷

Much of the decrying of luxury and extravagance was directed at the dress of the townspeople. For the past two decades, of course, plainness of dress had often been both patriotic and unavoidable. With the conclusion of the war, many Bostonians wished to dress up again. They were anxious to celebrate the return of peace by purchasing all sorts of finery, and British merchants were ready to sell them what they wanted. Anxious to reclaim the most lucrative of their pre-war markets, British merchants flooded Boston and other American ports with cheap consumer goods, especially clothing. Soon after the peace, the many shops of Boston were rapidly filled with dry goods. As long as easy credit was available both to the Boston shops and their customers, Bostonians made up for their years of devotion to linsey-woolsey and the like. As the townspeople dressed in the new imports, some became alarmed. They charged the women of Boston with being unduly absorbed in matters of dress. By the spring of 1784 writers in the town's newspapers were beginning to disparage the "gewgaws," "superfluities," and "tinsel trifles" worn by many of the women.⁸ Items such as lace, ruffles, ribbons, and

7. "A Constant Republican," Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser, July 21, 1785; John Andrews, "Commonplace Book," ms., in Andrews and Eliot Papers, Mass. Historical Soc.; Warren, Oration, p. 30; Gardiner, Oration, pp. 8, 34; "Sans Six Sou," American Herald, February 17, 1785; "A Young American," Boston Gazette, February 27, 1786; Evening Advertiser, September 29, 1785; "Lothario," Exchange Advertiser, June 16 and 23, 1785.

8. See, for example, Massachusetts Centinel, March 24 and June 12, 1784; American Herald, March 7, April 25, and May 2, 1785; Country Journal, July 7, 1785; "W.W.," Boston Gazette, July 25, 1785; and "A Patriot," Massachusetts Gazette, August 22, 1786.

bows became the symbols of the luxury that stern republicans feared would corrode the public virtue. The critics of luxury were also offended at times by the immodesty of some of the dresses they saw. A writer in the *Exchange Advertiser* commented that some women seemed "studious to expose in pure nature . . . their fair bosoms to public view." The women of the town were also criticized for giving undue attention to the beautification of their hair. One observer was outraged by the sight of barbers "running from house to house" to create "fantastic" hairstyles. Evidently the Parisian style caught on to some extent, for the writer in the *Advertiser* scoffed at those who were "enlarging, decorating, and loading their heads with unnecessary and ridiculous ornaments." Similarly, the conspicuous use of cosmetics was scorned. Another of the *Advertiser's* correspondents, who had no use for "hairdressers and perfumers," went so far as to accuse some women of going to church to "show their painted and patched faces."⁹

Although women received the greatest criticism, men were not spared. "Vanity is the prevailing passion of both sexes," one critic charged. Many of the town's "young mercantile bucks" were described as dressing ostentatiously and wearing their hair long and curled. Their appearance, taken together with their "manners," caused some of their critics to charge them with "effeminacy." An anonymous writer in the short-lived *Boston Magazine* exclaimed in disgust: "Behold that gewgaw butterfly, the beau who looks like a girl and smells like a civet cat, whose very words are female . . ."¹⁰

There are indications that the interest in fashion engendered a spirit of competition. Some people tried to keep up with or surpass their neighbors in dress. Foes of luxury such as "Censor" thought it especially unfortunate that people from the "middling" and poorer classes were being swept away by the tide of extravagance. Trying to keep up with those who could afford display, they were squandering "their substance." A writer who styled himself "A Cobler" reported seeing poor people using silk

9. *Exchange Advertiser*, September 15, 1785; "Thoughtful," *Massachusetts Centinel*, July 22, 1786; *Exchange Advertiser*, October 19, 1786.

10. "Censor," *American Herald*, June 13, 1785; *Massachusetts Centinel*, April 5, 1786; "Laconic," *Boston Gazette*, April 16, 1787; *Boston Magazine*, I (June 1784): 335.

handkerchiefs and wearing ruffles, fine coats, and beaver hats. According to a report in the *Independent Ledger*, people of "no property whatever" were dressing "upon a par with people possessed of independent fortunes." One critic suggested to readers of the *Continental Journal* that the "shop-boy" was now dressed "in such a style that [it] is hardly possible to distinguish between him and the first merchant in the city." And "Censor" professed his inability to "distinguish by their dress a lady worth one thousand pounds from one worth ten thousand." As the influence of Boston fashions spread, John Gardiner was appalled to see country girls coming to town "with their heads deformed with the plumes of the ostrich, and the feathers of other exotic birds."¹¹

From the standpoint of the defenders of virtue, matters went from bad to worse when the devotees of fashion chose to "promenade" in the streets, showing off their finery and setting a bad example for other young Bostonians. One of the favorite places for strolling was the "Mall," along the eastern side of the Common and adjacent to Common Street. Starchy republicans took a dim view of idle "sauntering" at any time. They would not have been impressed by the protest of "A Youth," who insisted that walking was an "amusement both innocent and healthful." Worst of all, however, was promenading on the Sabbath day. In the summer, according to "Ironicus," hundreds of people walked the Mall on Sunday afternoons. And walking was not the only means of display for well-dressed Bostonians. A Sunday ride in a carriage was a favorite pastime of some of the wealthier citizens. Not all of them waited until the conclusion of worship services. "Joshua" complained about the "rattling of carriages" while services were in progress. On one Sunday in late July of 1786, several congregations were "greatly disturbed" by traffic in the nearby streets. During the afternoon service at the Old South Meetinghouse, the congregation, it was reported, could hear scarcely a word. As might be expected, there were demands for enforcement of the bylaw restricting the use of carriages on

11. "Massachusetts," American Herald, June 12, 1786; "Censor," American Herald, June 13, 1785; Independent Ledger, June 20, 1785; "A Cobler," Independent Chronicle, April 20, 1786; Independent Ledger, August 15, 1785; Country Journal, July 7, 1785; Gardiner, Oration, p. 33.

Sunday. Some efforts at enforcement were made; at least one wealthy Bostonian was fined for violation of the bylaw.¹²

Entertainment of various sorts was regarded by some townspeople as additional evidence of luxury. As early as 1784 there were condemnations of the "present rage" of "gaming." "An Observer" suggested that "our bucks and high fellows" were preoccupied with billiards and whist, while humbler folk were absorbed in "all fours and shoe-maker's loo." Some people, according to "A.B.," were spending whole days with packs of cards. Card playing and other forms of "gaming" were denounced particularly as "seductions to youth." It was feared that these practices threatened to ruin young Bostonians, partly because they were often associated with gambling. One woman, for instance, was distressed over the possible fate of a "number of pretty youths, who, from day to day, attend in the public streets to see the wicked practice of a number of Negroes and great sailor-like-looking people idling away their time, and gaming for money from almost morning to night." One man offered some consolation to the readers of the *Independent Chronicle*: at least Boston was not yet "cursed with masquerades" and other evidences of "English elegance," such as plays, operas, and "Venetian balls." There were puppet shows, however. In late 1785 one townsman wanted the selectmen to take action against a puppet show that was going from one part of the town to another, endangering the "morals of youth who assemble . . . to partake of this obscene and ludicrous exhibition." The selectmen took immediate action; that same day they directed the clerk of Faneuil Hall Market to inform "the persons who exhibit puppet shows that they immediately desist from such exhibitions."¹³

12. "Massachusettensis," American Herald, June 12, 1786; "A Youth," Massachusetts Centinel, July 23, 1785; Exchange Advertiser, June 30, 1785; "Ironicus," Massachusetts Centinel, June 25, 1785; "Joshua," Boston Gazette, September 25, 1786; Massachusetts Centinel, July 26, 1786; "A Friend to the Inspectors," Massachusetts Centinel, July 29, 1786.

13. Boston Gazette, April 4, 1784; "An Observer," Massachusetts Centinel, October 8, 1785; "A.B.," Independent Ledger, December 1, 1783; Massachusetts Centinel, November 13, 1784; "A Consistent Republican," Independent Chronicle, July 21, 1785; Massachusetts Centinel, November 23, 1785; A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Selectmen's Minutes from 1776 through 1786, vol. 25 of the Reports of the Record Commissioners of Boston (Boston, 1894), XXV: 286.

Even the staunchest upholders of public virtue seem to have offered little comment about dances and concerts, which were regular occurrences in the 1780s. Both dances and concerts were held in Concert Hall, a short distance west of the State House, on Hanover Street. The second floor had a room, done in the Corinthian style, which served as a music or dancing room, as well as a place for "polite entertainments." According to a report in the summer of 1785 a sizable crowd gathered there one Thursday noon for some "innocent and healthy" dancing. Christopher Champlin, Jr., attended a large dance in the fall of 1783, but his letter to his father does not tell where it was held. Young Champlin, probably a student at Harvard at the time, reported that 340 ladies attended a ball on a Tuesday evening. The dancing, he said, "exceeded my expectations." It also evidently reinforced his intention to study dancing with a Mr. Turner.¹⁴

For some years a social group had met fortnightly in Concert Hall, apparently exciting little, if any, hostile comment. However, when the Sans Souci Club, or Tea Assembly, was formed in 1784, it provoked one of the most furious debates of the period. Supported by the sale of tickets to subscribers, this club also met every two weeks at Concert Hall. Between the hours of six in the evening and midnight, the members of the club listened to music, danced, played cards, and enjoyed a variety of refreshments, including tea, coffee, and hot chocolate. Most of those who participated were young people. Men of at least nineteen and women of at least fifteen were eligible to attend. Young lawyers, among them Harrison Gray Otis and Perez Morton, seem to have been especially well-represented. Morton's wife, the former Sarah Apthorp, then a woman in her mid-twenties with "unusual beauty and charm" and "poetic talent," was probably the club's leading light.¹⁵

14. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776*, (New York, 1955), p. 21; *Exchange Advertiser*, August 11, 1785; Christopher Champlin, Jr., to Christopher Champlin, October 23, 1783, in *Letters of Boston Merchants, 1732-1790*, III, Baker Library, Harvard University, Cambridge. For evidence that concerts were also popular in Boston, see *Independent Ledger*, February 24, 1783; and *Independent Chronicle*, March 4, 1784, and April 27, 1786.

15. "Son of Candour," *Massachusetts Centinel*, January 26, 1785. There are general accounts of the club in Herbert S. Allen, *John Hancock: Patriot in Purple* (New

To Samuel Adams and like-minded republicans, the flourishing of an institution like the Sans Souci Club was most alarming. Private card playing and dancing were bad enough, but they found the Tea Assembly "totally repugnant to virtue." Under a pseudonym, Adams wrote for the *Massachusetts Centinel* a series of articles denouncing the club and calling for its suppression. He regarded it as the source of the recent "increase in dissipation" in Boston. John Eliot, the pastor of a church in the North End, branded the club simply "unrepublican." Down in the town of Milton, Mercy Otis Warren took note of the activities of what she called a "ridiculous institution for such a country as this." She is believed to have been the author of a didactic play inspired by the Sans Souci Club. It featured characters such as "Young Forward" (modelled after Harrison Gray Otis), "Little Pert" (Isaac Winslow, Jr.), "Madame Importance" (Sarah Morton), "Republican Heroine" (Mrs. Catherine Macaulay Graham), and Mrs. Warren herself. In act two, scene one, "Republican Heroine" exclaims: "I could scarcely believe it possible that this country, particularly this town, . . . should so early plunge into the utmost excesses of dissipation...." Mrs. Warren responds by predicting the demise of the club.¹⁶

Indeed, the Sans Souci Club seems to have disappeared by the summer of 1785, but not before its proponents had mounted a spirited defense and counterattack. To "A Bostonian," the club was a "harmless legal assembly"; to "One of a Number," it was a means of passing away a "few of the gloomy evenings of winter"; and to "Crito," it was a way of cheating "rough winter of some of its horrors." It was, insisted "A Bostonian," "A company regulated with propriety, governed by decency, and observant of

York, 1948), p. 317; and in Samuel Eliot Morison, Harrison Gray Otis, 1765-1848: The Urbane Federalist (2nd edition revised, Boston, 1969), pp. 42-48. For information about Sarah Morton, see Dictionary of American Biography.

16. For criticism of the club, see Adams' letters by "The Observer," *Massachusetts Centinel*, especially January 15 and February 9, 1785; John Eliot to Jeremy Belknap, February 24, 1785, in "Belknap Papers, part 3: Miscellaneous Letters and Papers, 1724-1798," *Mass. Historical Soc., Collections*, 6th series, IV (Boston, 1891): 286; and Sans Souci, Alias Free and Easy: or an Evening's Peep into a Polite Circle. An Intire [sic] New Entertainment in Three Acts (Boston, 1785), pp. 2 and 11. Regarding Adams' use of pseudonyms such as "The Observer," see James Karl Somerville, "Patriot Moralists: An Intellectual Portrait of Samuel Adams," Ph.D. dissertation, Western Reserve University, 1965, pp. 94-95 and passim.

the nicest and most scrupulous laws of delicacy." "Crito" found the club valuable for promoting "decent manners" and "polite attentions." He also contended that it was "preserving our young men from being ruined at taverns." Another writer added that it was better for nineteen year-olds to be in the "Tea Assembly" than in a brothel. In defending their society, Harrison Gray Otis and his friends vigorously denounced their critics, especially Samuel Adams. They had readily detected Adams' authorship of the series by "The Observer." Otis, writing as "Sans Souci," pointedly charged the "flaming tribune of the people" with trying to stir up a mob against the club. "A Bostonian" accused the old revolutionary of publishing "egregious falsehoods" and "basely" trying to "brand with infamy the most spotless and respectable characters among us." The fundamental problem, as "Crito" saw it, was that men like Adams "considered all improvements as innovations on the principles of their grandfathers," and all "who wish to be either wiser or happier than their ancestors" as "heretical upstarts and degenerate citizens." And Otis questioned the "general application of the Greek and Roman stories to every casual occurrence." Still another writer responded to "The Observer" by wishing that people would simply be left alone, to be allowed to enjoy life. In exasperation he asked: "Are we . . . never to be easy; never to enjoy the present moment -- for fear of imaginary dangers and possible corruptions?" When Benjamin Russell and William Warden, the publishers of the *Massachusetts Centinel*, announced their intention to issue a publication about the Sans Souci Club, several of its defenders tried to intimidate Russell. Samuel Jarvis went so far as to attempt to horsewhip the young publisher. Undaunted, Russell and Warden wrote that they were determined to publish the controversial item, which was probably Mercy Otis Warren's play.¹⁷

In the late winter of 1784-1785 the storm over the "Tea Assembly" subsided. Within a few weeks, however, the "Old Romans," as Samuel Eliot Morison called them, were worrying

17. "A Bostonian," *Massachusetts Centinel*, January 19, 1785; "One of a Number," *Massachusetts Centinel*, January 19, 1785; "Crito," *Independent Chronicle*, January 20, 1785; "Son of Candour," *Massachusetts Centinel*, January 26, 1785; "Sans Souci," *Massachusetts Centinel*, January 19, 1785; *American Herald*, January 31, 1785. On the Jarvis-Russell episode, see Morison, *Otis*, p. 44; *Massachusetts Centinel*, January 19, 1785; and *Boston Gazette*, January 17, 1785.

about another institution of luxury. Money was being raised by public subscription to build an entertainment hall at the southern end of the Mall. Commonly referred to as "the Orchestra," it would accommodate about a thousand people and would be open every evening except Saturday and Sunday. Music was apparently to be the principal attraction, but there were also to be refreshments -- tea, coffee, wine, and cake. Young Elizabeth Cranch was in town in early July, when the building was near enough to completion for an opening concert to be held there. She joined the "multitudes" who attended the half-hour performance, which was climaxed by clapping and three "huzzas." Under the influence of the "perfectly enchanting" music that she had heard, Elizabeth dreamed that night that she was in Italy, "hearing the finest performers in the country." But to Boston's steadfast republicans "the house on the Mall" was another serious threat to public virtue. "A Citizen," writing in the *Herald*, said he could not imagine a "more alarming circumstance" than the building of that "house of dissipation," and another townsman thought that the music played there might prove "destructive" to republicanism. Actually, the music seems to have been on the heavy side; after hearing a performance on July 28, one Bostonian wrote to the *Advertiser* of his wish that "songs, cotillions, country dance, and other sprightly tunes had been interwoven with the concertos." In any event, the entertainments on the Mall proved transitory; in September the hall was sold at auction for four hundred dollars.¹⁸

The pessimism pervading much of what was written in Confederation Boston was not due solely to the fear of future evils. Strict republicans saw around them evidence of the crumbling of public virtue. Samuel Adams, writing as "The Observer," judged that the young nation was already in "decline." Another writer went even further, suggesting that the United States offered an example of an unprecedented "political phenomenon," for while yet in its infancy it was "in a very advanced state of depravity and corruption." From the conversation of people around town, as well as what appeared in

18. Morison, *Otis*, pp. 43 and 48; "Censor," *American Herald*, June 13, 1785; Elizabeth Cranch to Lucy Cranch, July 6, 1785, in Jacob Norton Papers, Mass. Historical Soc.; "A Citizen," *American Herald*, July 4, 1785; *Massachusetts Centinel*, October 1, 1785.

the newspapers, Adams concluded that a number of people thought that the nation was "on the brink of inevitable ruin."¹⁹

To townspeople who shared Adams' general view of matters, a significant part of the harvest of luxury was the idleness that prevailed in Boston. An unusually large number of people seemed to be loitering in the streets. One writer also objected to the "scandal circles" that he claimed to see on "every corner." These were said to be especially conspicuous on Sundays. Men of all ages crowded the street corners near the State House, and youths also clustered about the barber shops on that day. But idleness was apparent on business days, as well. The writer of a chronicle in the *Advertiser* especially found fault with the idle wanderings of a "certain class" who went from shop to shop and office to office, telling long stories and interfering with business. Another writer objected to the life style of "our mushroom gentry," who were said to "rise at 10, eat breakfast at 11, dine at 4, and visit till midnight."²⁰

A loosening of restraints was seen as another result of the general decline of public virtue. As early as 1783 one writer thought that children and servants were less restrained than before. A resident of Roxbury took note of a "decline of manners" among the young people of Boston; they appeared to him to be "ungoverned." They were also accused of treating old people with disrespect. At the height of the uproar over the Sans Souci Club, for instance, "Sans Six Sou" reported that some young people used indecent language in speaking to Samuel Adams, whom they believed to be its chief detractor. Groups of young men on street corners in the center of town made a practice of making "indecent remarks" about the "dress and appearance of ladies and gentlemen" going to and from church. Worse yet, there were instances of rowdiness. According to "A Spectator," one group of boys pursued a laborer who was passing through the marketplace. When they insulted him with the "most indecent language," he roughed them up. The boys reported the man to a justice of the peace, who

19. "The Observer," Massachusetts Centinel, June 22, 1785; Country Journal, July 7, 1785.

20. Massachusetts Centinel, April 26, 1786; "A Friend to Decency," Massachusetts Centinel, May 28, 1785; "Ironicus," Massachusetts Centinel, June 25, 1785; Exchange Advertiser, October 19, 1786; Boston Gazette, January 25, 1785.

fined him four dollars. Another group of youths knocked down a country woman one evening, breaking her leg and dislocating her hip. In another "wicked display of buckism," under the cover of darkness a group destroyed the frame of a new home that John Ennis, a glazier, was building for his young family.²¹

Licentiousness as well as luxury was associated with the fall of the ancient republics, whose histories were taken so seriously in the eighteenth century. Reports of drunkenness were regarded as evidence of the spread of licentiousness in Confederation Boston. From time to time the Boston newspapers reported the deaths of men who had fallen into the sea or otherwise died while intoxicated. Predictably, there were also reports of families being neglected while fathers and husbands spent long hours, even whole days and nights, in taverns. But the use of intoxicants by the young seemed most alarming. In the fall of 1786, according to a report in the *Exchange Advertiser*, a number of youths were gathering "almost every night" and, after "intoxicating their senses," were "sallying forth into the streets" to stir up mischief and keep awake a number of the inhabitants.²²

Prostitution, of course, was seen as a grave form of licentiousness. This vice was not new to Boston in the post-war period. During the colonial era, something of a redlight district had developed on the northern side of the westernmost peak of the ridge dominated by Beacon Hill. In the 1780s it still seems to have been known as "Mount Whoredom." There was also at least one brothel in the North End. In the literature of the period there were occasional oblique references to prostitution. One of the most pointed comments was made in the spring of 1786 by a writer who hoped for a remedy for "this deadliest of our domestic evils." Concern for the morals of young men seems to have prompted his letter, for he noted that each night the "constitutions, morals, and money of very many of the youth of

21. *Boston Evening-Post and the General Advertiser*, May 31, 1783; "Roxburiensis," *Boston Gazette*, July 25, 1785; "Sans Six Sou," *American Herald*, February 7, 1785; "A Friend to Decency," *Massachusetts Centinel*, May 28, 1785; "A Spectator," *Massachusetts Centinel*, September 21, 1785; *American Herald*, January 23, 1786; *Country Journal*, October 26, 1786.

22. "A Cobler," *Independent Chronicle*, April 20, 1786; *Exchange Advertiser*, October 19, 1786.

this metropolis" were being sacrificed to a "number of infamous sharks" at a "certain bagnio, to the northward."²³

Bostonians thought a great deal about what might be done to turn back the tide of luxury and licentiousness. Many thought that the town of Boston needed better moral leadership.²⁴ Others emphasized the necessity of limiting or even excluding imports that were not necessities of life.²⁵ To still other townspeople, the enactment of new bylaws and stricter enforcement of existing ones seemed necessary for the protection of public virtue.²⁶ Finally, if one takes seriously the outpouring of rhetoric about virtue, luxury, and licentiousness, it becomes evident that the writers and orators of the 1780s expected their words to have a salutary effect. Many of the writers and orators of Confederation Boston were, in effect, calling for a revival of civic virtue. Pessimistic though many of them were, they could hardly have persisted in their campaign against luxury and licentiousness if they had not clung to the hope that they would be heard and heeded. Jeremiads may have failed Puritanism; they must not fail republicanism.²⁷

The question of whether the Confederation period can accurately be described as the "Critical Period" remains debatable. Unquestionably, however, many Bostonians of that era *believed* that they were faced with a profound crisis. They worried, of course, over the economic difficulties that seemed to assume crisis

23. Morison, Otis, p. 219; Independent Chronicle, July 29, 1784; Massachusetts Centinel, April 19, 1786.

24. On the examples of leaders, see "The Observer," Massachusetts Centinel, June 15, 1785; "A Citizen," American Herald, July 11, 1785; Country Journal, August 3, 1786; January 19, 1784; Independent Chronicle, August 17 and 31, 1786; and Boston Magazine, I (June 1784): 335.

25. American Herald, February 21, 1785; "Massachusettensis," American Herald, June 19, 1786; Boston Gazette, August 28, 1786; Massachusetts Centinel, June 11, 1786; A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Town Records, 1784 to 1796, vol. 31 of the Reports of the Record Commissioners of Boston (Boston, 1903), p. 78.

26. Selectmen's Minutes, XXV: 220.

27. See H. James Henderson, Party Politics in the Continental Congress (New York, 1974), p. 321.

proportions, especially between 1784 and 1786. Most critical of all in their view, however, were the defects of their society, of the people themselves. For one thing, the republicans of Boston seemed to lack the virtue essential to the success of republicanism. Many Bostonians, in their deepening pessimism about their loss of virtue, were prepared by 1787 to support a bold new effort to redeem the nation. That effort appeared to be their last and best chance to preserve republicanism.