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Historical Journal of Massachusetts Volume 13, No 1 (January 1985).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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Novanglus and Massachusettensis: Different Conceptions of a Crisis

Jonathan M. Atkins

John Adams, after returning home to Braintree from the First Continental Congress, was disturbed when he read a series of articles in the *Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Post Boy* written by "Massachusettensis." He immediately recognized the articles as the work of either of his old friends, Jonathan Sewall or Daniel Leonard. According to Massachusettensis, the rebellion against the Coercive Acts could not be justified. Parliament had authority over the colonies, and their resistance was doomed to failure. These papers worried Adams because the clarity and forcefulness of their arguments could possibly swing the colony away from the defense of its rights into submission:

These papers were well written, abounded with Wit, discovered good Information, and were conducted with a subtlety of Art and Address, wonderfully calculated to keep Up the Spirits of their Party, to depress ours, to spread general intimidation and to make Proselytes among those, whose Principles and Judgement give Way to their fears, and these compose at least one third of Mankind.¹

Articles by Massachusettensis continued to appear in the *Massachusetts Gazette* for several more weeks. No fully developed answers to his claims were submitted to any Boston newspaper, and the articles appeared to be making "a very visible impression on many Minds."² Thus Adams took it upon himself to answer Massachusettensis by writing his own series of articles for the *Boston Gazette*. Adams signed these papers "Novanglus," the "New Englishman," and for the first few months of 1775 Adams and Daniel Leonard, the author of the Massachusettensis papers, both attempted to convince the people of Massachusetts of the accuracy of their interpretations of the relationship between Britain and her North American colonies; both knew that the future of the province depended upon what the people perceived that relationship to be.

So began one of the most famous polemical duels of the American Revolution, the Novanglus-Massachusettensis newspaper debate.³ "Massachusettensis" has long been considered one of the best presentations of the Loyalist position, and "Novanglus," though not as effective at popular persuasion, has received due consideration from historians because of the prominence of its author. Recently the debate has enjoyed renewed popularity among historians because of the number of studies seeking to define the Patriot and Loyalist ideologies

and the importance of these ideologies.⁴ In most studies, Novanglus and Massachusetts are approached separately from one another. This approach is appropriate, since, although written in opposition to each other, the papers can stand independently as statements of the Patriot and Loyalist positions; several New England newspapers carried reprints of one paper or the other without its opponent.⁵ Yet a direct comparison of the two reveals some interesting points. Adams and Leonard wrote for the same audience and at the same point in the course of the Revolution, and from their opposing positions they professed the same goals. In the course of their arguments, however, they emphasized the importance of different principles and built their interpretations of the Revolution upon these principles. This difference also led them to contrasting interpretations of the colonies' constitutional ties to Great Britain.

The root of the conflict between Britain and America ran deeper than simple resistance to taxation. Indeed, the dispute questioned the nature of the relationship between the mother country and her colonies, a relationship that had never been explicitly defined. The colonies knew their subordinate position: royal instructions to colonial governors and the enforcement of the Navigation Acts frequently reminded the colonies of this standing, and prior to 1763 the colonists had been satisfied with it.⁶ In common law, however, colonization was a *cassus omissus*, a case not provided for: how subordinate, then, were the colonies? Were they subject to the crown, to Parliament, or to both? Also, was subordination decreed by British law, or was it permitted by the consent of the colonies? Before the Stamp Act, the colonists had had little reason to think about such questions. There had been only occasional confrontations between Britain and the colonies prior to 1765, and in most circumstances the problem had been resolved before the colonists found reason to question their subordination. The Stamp Act first encouraged the colonists to analyze their relationship with Britain.⁷ After the repeal of the Act most colonists had a better conception of that relationship, but that between sovereign and subordinate remained undefined.⁸ It would remain so until circumstances forced a clearer definition.

Likewise, Leonard and Adams approached the Revolution with only a vague conception of the relationship with Britain, and the events of the Revolution would determine which course they were to follow. With each new turn in British-American relations, both men were forced to judge which side was right or wrong, to consider the consequences, and to decide what action would be best for them to take. In the early 1770s, it looked as if the two would together uphold the Patriot standard. Adams already had twice wielded his pen in defense of the colonies during the Stamp Act crisis with his "Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law" and with the town instructions to the Braintree representative to the Massachusetts General Court. Leonard, a member of one of the most prominent families in the province, had entered the General Court in 1769 at age twenty-nine. During his first years in the House he was known as a zealous opponent of the King, and in 1773 he was appointed to the colony's Committee of Correspondence.⁹ After the Boston Tea Party, however, the two men followed divergent paths. Adams heartily condoned the Tea Party and continued to support the colonies; his erudition soon gained for him the reputation as a political philosopher of the resistance, and in May of 1774, he was selected one of the colony's representatives to the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia.¹⁰

To Leonard, the Tea Party was “a more unaccountable frenzy, and more disgraceful to the annals of America, than that of the witchcraft,” and he slowly moved away from the Patriot cause.¹¹ Adams later recalled that the “two arch-tempters, Hutchinson and Sewall,” courted Leonard heavily until he was won over to the support of Hutchinson’s administration in the Spring of 1774.¹² Later that year, Massachusetts’ new governor, General Thomas Gage, exercising the authority of Parliament’s Massachusetts Government Act, appointed Leonard to the Governor’s Council, whose membership had previously been determined by election by the House of Representatives. Unlike most of these mandamus appointments, who were prevented from taking the oath of their new office by mobs, Leonard managed to take his oath without incident. Soon afterward, however, a Taunton mob drove him and his family out of their home and into the security of occupied Boston. While Adams defended American rights at the Continental Congress, Leonard worked as solicitor to the Boston Board of Customs, and waited, under the protection of the British Army, for some new turn of events.

While in Boston, Leonard began to write his “Massachusettensis” papers. When Adams began replying with “Novanglus,” he sought to repudiate point-by-point each of Leonard’s main arguments.¹³ Both authors, however, professed the same ultimate goal, peaceful settlement and reconciliation with the mother country. This was an obvious goal for *Massachusettensis*, since the necessity of reconciliation was a prevailing theme in his papers.¹⁴ Yet Adams also wanted to maintain the colonies’ connection with Britain. At this time he was far from a militant revolutionary, and even as late as 1776 he believed reconciliation to be the ideal solution, although by that time he considered it no longer possible. “Reconciliation, if practicable, and peace if attainable, you very well know,” he wrote to his wife, “would be as agreeable to my inclinations, and as advantageous to my interest, as to any man’s.”¹⁵ As *Novanglus*, he denied that independence had ever been a Whig goal; rather, he declared that “we are a part of the British dominions, that is of the king of Great-Britain, and it is our interest and duty to continue so.”¹⁶

Intertwined with the desire to maintain ties between Britain and the colonies was the desire to preserve the rights and privileges guaranteed by the English constitution. *Novanglus* portrayed the colonies’ resistance as “the cause of liberty, truth, virtue and humanity,” and liberty was guaranteed by both nature and the constitution. “English liberties are but certain rights of nature reserved to the citizen, by the English constitution, which rights cleaved to our ancestors when they crossed the Atlantic.”¹⁷ One of *Massachusettensis*’ contentions against the Patriots was that their cries against parliamentary supremacy “destroys the very idea of our having a British constitution.” “An Englishman glories in being subject to and protected by such a government” as Britain’s, but the Patriots “have been arguing away our most essential rights;” their cause “deprives us of the bill of rights . . . of English laws and of the British constitution.”¹⁸

Aside from their agreement as to the most desirable outcome of the conflict, *Novanglus* and *Massachusettensis* disagreed on virtually every other aspect of the struggle with Parliament. They did agree that the present crisis was the result

of a conspiracy. However, Novanglus believed that a Massachusetts “junto,” led by former Governor Francis Bernard, aspired to render the colonial assembly useless through parliamentary taxation. *Massachusettensis* asserted that the colony’s Whigs had used the Stamp Act to arouse the fears of the people in order to solidify their control of the General Court and that they had established in the province “a despotism, cruelly carried into execution by mobs and riots.” Novanglus forecasted victory if the resistance should lead to armed conflict; *Massachusettensis* despaired of any hope of victory against the most powerful nation on the globe and predicted that New England would only “furnish the world with one more instance of the fatal consequences of rebellion.” Most importantly, their interpretations of the colonies’ legal relationship with Britain contrasted sharply. *Massachusettensis* claimed that Parliament had always had the right to tax the colonies and had done so several times in the past. Parliament had this right because Massachusetts was part of the British Empire and thus was obligated to subject itself to “the supreme power of the state, which is vested in the estates of Parliament.” Novanglus, on the other hand, denied that Parliament had any authority over the colonies without the consent of the colonists. The British government was not an empire; it was a republic in the form of a limited monarchy, “a government of laws, and not of men.” Since the colonists had left England, they owed their allegiance only to the crown. They had, by “their free chearful consent,” permitted Parliament to regulate the colonists’ commerce, but the supreme authority in the North American colonies belonged to each of the provincial legislatures.¹⁹

What was the source of the authors’ disagreement? Why did they present radically different interpretations of the causes and consequences of the Revolution and of the nature of the relationship between Britain and America? The answer to these questions seems to be that each author saw the crisis of 1774 with different assumptions about the nature of the resistance and the threat. Each author came to see in the Revolution an attack upon a fundamental principle that each held dear; and it was their difference in fundamental principles that led to Adams’ and Leonard’s different conceptions of the crisis. They agreed that the connection with Britain and the preservation of rights were good things in themselves. But Adams, seeing Parliament’s attempt to impose unprecedented powers, and having read Thomas Hutchinson’s statement that “there must be an Abridgement of what are called English liberties,” believed that he was witnessing the implementation of an actual plot aimed at destroying the colonists’ liberties.²⁰ Hence, the protection of the colonists’ rights became the keynote to the “Novanglus” papers, because the fundamental principle guiding their author was the belief in the sanctity of individual rights and that they must be preserved at all cost. Leonard, meanwhile, had abandoned the Patriot cause soon after the Boston Tea Party, and as his defection became apparent he was harassed by the people of Massachusetts. Writing in Boston under the protection of the army, Leonard came to see anarchy as the greatest threat to the peace of the province. The desire for order and stable government became the fundamental principle upon which he built “*Massachusettensis*.” Order and stability must be maintained, Leonard asserted, even if some privileges must be lost, and the surest method of maintaining order and stability was to submit to Parliament and maintain ties with Britain.

This difference in fundamental principles becomes clearer when one compares the authors' interpretation of the source of the crisis. The situation in Massachusetts was frightening enough: the uproar against the Massachusetts Government Act had brought the colony's government to a standstill, and the only effective government remaining was that imposed by the British army. Leonard had undertaken the writing of "Massachusettensis" because he was afraid that conditions would get even worse, and "it is not only excuseable, but even praiseworthy for an individual to offer to the public any thing that he may think has a tendency to ward off the impending danger."²¹ Yet the ostensible reason for unrest amazed Leonard:

Is it not a most astonishing instance of caprice, or infatuation, that a province, torn from its foundations, should be precipitating itself into a war with Great-Britain because the British parliament asserts its right of raising a revenue in America, inasmuch as the claim of that right is as ancient as the colonies themselves, and there is at present no grievous exercise of it?²²

The denial of Parliament's authority came about, not as a question of constitutionality, but simply as an instrument for political expediency. This device proved that the Whigs would stop at nothing to ensure their dominance of the colony. In their drive to power, they had not only aroused imaginary fears in the minds of the people, but also had threatened the only source of stability in the colony, the British government. "Rebellion is the most atrocious offence that can be perpetuated by man," Leonard concluded, for

—it dissolves the social band, annihilates the security resulting from law and government; [and] introduces fraud, violence, rapine, murder, sacrilege, and the long train of evils that riot uncontrolled in a state of nature.²³

Upon this fundamental assumption of the evil of rebellion and the necessity of security, Leonard based his constitutional argument of the relationship between Britain and America. According to Janice Potter and Robert M. Calhoun, most loyalist polemics defined "disloyalty," or rebellion, as "an ugly and destructive action"—"the inevitably violent exposure of the vicious animal appetites which, implanted in human nature, were barely restrained by the conventions and habits of civilization and the laws and authority of legally established institutions."²⁴ The danger of rebellion lay not merely in any immediate changes in government, but in its degenerating effect upon the colonies' people and political culture. "Random, spontaneous acts of aggression created an aura of their own—unintended and unanticipated by the perpetrators of such conduct—which corroded the structure of civility and acquiescence to authority that were essential to civil government."²⁵ Leonard had already seen the beginnings of the dissolution of Massachusetts society when his countrymen drove him out of his home and fired shots into the house containing his pregnant wife. Now there was no effective government in Massachusetts except for that imposed by the army. The only hope Leonard saw for the province was to abandon rebellion, since "many of us are insensible of our true state and real danger."²⁶ The only way to persuade the people to abandon rebellion was to

convince them that they had no grievance against the British government and that Parliament had legitimate authority over the colonies, including authority to tax them. Thus Massachusetts argued that the rebellion had no hope of success against the most powerful nation on the globe, that the true source of the province's discontent was the Whig's despotism, and that Parliament was, and had always been, the supreme power in the British Empire and in Massachusetts.²⁷

Moreover, this belief in the evil of rebellion explains Leonard's conversion to Loyalism. He could accept the violence of resistance to the Stamp Act, including the destruction of then-Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson's home, because some mob action was an accepted practice of resistance in colonial politics.²⁸ These early riots merely supplemented the main thrust of the opposition, which was being channeled through normal political procedure. As long as it appeared to be no more than constitutional opposition to bad policy, Leonard approved of "revolution."²⁹ But the nature of resistance changed after the Tea Party. Prior to that event, there appeared to be little chance of the colonies' striking out for independence; after the Tea Party, separation from the mother country became a distinct possibility, and the Coercive Acts and the Continental Congress seemed to be driving the two further apart. Independence, Leonard was sure, would bring the "uncontroled" state of nature to the colonies. Thus as Massachusetts he abandoned his own Patriot past. The resistance to the Stamp Act, to which Leonard had consented, "did not dream of denying the authority of parliament to tax us." The colony's Whigs, with whom he had associated himself, became "the offspring of two sisters, avarice and ambition;" and the Committee of Correspondence, on which he had served, became "the foulest, subtlest and most venomous serpent that ever issued from the eggs of sedition."³⁰

When Adams looked at the colony's condition, he had no doubt where the source of the crisis lay. It was not a case of the people being excited into rage over a legitimate government measure. Instead, the rebellion was a sincere defense of the people's rights:

The people are in their nature so gentle, that there never was a government yet, in which thousands of mistakes were not overlooked. The most sensible and jealous people are so little attentive to government, that there are no instances of resistance, until repeated, multiplied oppressions have placed it beyond a doubt, that their rulers had formed settled plans to deprive them of their liberties.³¹

It had become apparent to Adams that royal officials in the colonies had formed such "settled plans." For him, the essence of the rebellion was resistance to tyranny and the preservation of the colonists' rights. The "republican spirit" of the colonies was "far from incompatible with the British constitution;" if allowed to flourish, that spirit "will insure us in the end redress of grievances and an happy reconciliation with Great Britain." Adams was willing to risk separation from Britain in order to preserve the colonists' liberty. Upon this desire to maintain the colonists' rights Adams constructed "Novanglus," where

he encouraged his countrymen to resist to the utmost the encroachment of Parliament's power. Even if the resistance should fail, the colonists could be content in the knowledge of the righteousness of their cause, for "if they die, they cannot be said to lose, for death is better than slavery."³²

To Novanglus, then, the Revolution was a sincere defense of the colonists' liberties; to Massachusettensis, it was a challenge to Britain's legal sovereignty, because it threatened to undo the Empire and invited anarchy to the province. These different conceptions of the Revolution are perhaps best exemplified by their descriptions of what Massachusettensis called the "latent spark" within the breasts of the people. Massachusettensis considered this latent spark a mere passion, "capable of being kindled into a flame" by "the employment of the disaffected." To Novanglus, it was nothing less than the love of liberty: "Human nature itself is evermore an advocate for liberty."³³

The importance to the authors of fundamental principles determined the interpretations that Novanglus and Massachusettensis offered to the people of the colony. To Novanglus, liberty had always been the cornerstone of the colonial governments, and Parliament could claim no authority over the colonists without the colonists' consent. To Massachusettensis, Parliament was the supreme authority of Massachusetts because that body offered a stable government that could provide order in the colonies, if only the colonists would let it perform that function. When war came, the authors' basic assumptions caused them to follow different courses. The bloodshed at Lexington Green convinced Adams that separation was the only way to safeguard American liberty, and once convinced of this belief he never abandoned the goal of American independence.³⁴ Leonard left America and served the Empire for several years as Chief Justice of Bermuda. He eventually turned down a chance to return to America, because, after twenty-five years of service, he considered himself a British subject rather than an American exile. Yet in 1775 both Leonard and Adams had wanted to preserve the colonies' ties to Britain: it was the importance of order to one, and liberty to the other, that led them on their divergent paths. When compared to one another, Novanglus and Massachusettensis represent an early consideration of what became a dominant theme in the history of the United States: the struggle between order and freedom.

NOTES

1. L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge, 1961), 3:313.
2. *Ibid.*
3. See Benjamin W. Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts, A History* (Millwood, New York, 1979), pp. 274-77; Moses Coit Tyler, *The Literary History of the American Revolution, 1763-1783* (London, 1897; rpt. New York, 1941), 1:356-68; and William A. Benton, *Whig-Loyalism: An Aspect of Political Ideology in the American Revolutionary Era* (Rutherford, New Jersey, 1969), pp. 128-30. The best exposition of the principal themes of the debate is Bernard Mason's introduction to *The American Colonial Crisis: The Daniel Leonard-John Adams Letters to the Press, 1774-1775*, ed. Bernard Mason (New York, 1972), pp. ix-xix.
4. Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1967) remains the outstanding study of the Revolutionary ideology. The most recent work considering a Loyalist ideology is Janice Potter's *Liberty We Seek: Loyalist Ideology in Colonial New York and Massachusetts* (Cambridge, 1983).
5. See, for example, Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, *passim*, and Potter, *Liberty We Seek*, pp. 17-20 and *passim*; Robert J. Taylor et al., eds., *The Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge, 1977-1979), 2:223.
6. Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts*, p. 199.
7. Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1953), pp. 5-6.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
9. Ralph Davol, "Daniel Leonard," in Allen Johnson, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1928-1936), 11:175; *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1919-), 50:13-14. Unfortunately, there is no good biography of Leonard. The only large-scale work on his life is Davol's *Two Men of Taunton: In The Course of Human Events, 1731-1829* (Taunton, 1912), a dual biography of Leonard and Robert Treat Paine. Davol, however, admittedly took many liberties where he lacked sources, and as a result his book is in many instances unreliable.
10. Stephen G. Kurtz, "The Political Science of John Adams, A Guide to his Statecraft," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser. 25 (October 1968):613.
11. Page Smith, *John Adams*, 2 vols. (Garden City, New York, 1962), 1:149.
12. Charles F. Adams, ed., *The Life and Works of John Adams* (Boston, 1856), 10:195.
13. Throughout the debate, Adams thought he was arguing with Jonathan Sewall, rather than Leonard; he did not learn of his error until 1821. See Adams, *Life and Work of John Adams*, 4:10.

14. See, for example, Mason, *American Colonial Crisis*, pp. 36-37.
15. Charles F. Adams, ed., *Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife Abigail Adams During the Revolution, With A Memoir of Mrs. Adams* (New York, 1876), p. 135.
16. Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 2:263, 2:326; see also 2:249-50, 2:260-61, and 2:306.
17. *Ibid*, 2:232, 2:330.
18. Mason, *American Colonial Crisis*, pp. 33, 36.
19. *Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Post Boy*, December 12 and 26, 1774, January 9, 1775; and Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 2:314, 319.
20. Bernard Bailyn, "Butterfield's Adams: Notes for a Sketch," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser. 19 (April 1962): 253; Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, 1976), pp. 72-73. On Hutchinson's statement, see Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 221-73.
21. Mason, *American Colonial Crisis*, p. 3. See also Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts*, p. 270; and John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, 1966), p. 9.
22. Mason, *American Colonial Crisis*, p. 71.
23. *Ibid*, p. 56.
24. Janice Potter and Robert M. Calhoun, "The Character and Coherence of the Loyalist Press," in *The Press and the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench (Boston, 1981), p. 236.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 259-60.
26. Mason, *American Colonial Crisis*, p. 4; Potter and Calhoun, "Character and Coherence of the Loyalist Press," p. 238.
27. It is interesting to note that the importance of the fear of rebellion distinguishes Leonard from other Massachusetts Loyalists, including Jonathan Sewall—the putative "Massachusettensis." While Leonard left the Whigs after the consequences of resistance were becoming apparent, Sewall never questioned Parliament's authority over Massachusetts. Instead, Sewall based his polemic on his belief that the Whigs were misleading the people with false charges toward the British government. Thus Sewall became one of the first of Massachusetts' politicians to be identified as a Loyalist, giving credence to the belief that he wrote "Massachusettensis." Leonard came over to the Loyalists much later and based his writing on a variety of already prevalent Loyalist arguments, including on some notes supplied by Sewall. See Potter and Calhoun, "Character and Coherence of the Loyalist Press," pp. 236-40; Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America: 1760-1781* (New York, 1965), pp. 68-75; and Carol Berkin, *Jonathan Sewall: Odyssey of an American Loyalist* (New York, 1974).

28. Dirk Hoerder, "Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776," in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Illinois, 1976), pp. 235-37; see also Gordon S. Wood, "A Note on Mobs in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser. 23 (October 1966):635-42; and Pauline Maier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser. 27 (January 1970):3-35.
29. That Leonard viewed the early resistance to Parliament as a political game is supported by the fact that he would prepare for his law club both positive and negative arguments to such questions as "Whether the subject could be taxed without his Consent in Person or by his Representative?" and "Whether We Americans are represented in Parliament or not?" Butterfield, *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 1:299.
30. Mason, *American Colonial Crisis*, pp. 9, 25, 30.
31. Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 2:231.
32. *Ibid*, 2:278, 232.
33. Mason, *American Colonial Crisis*, p. 14; Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 2:229.
34. Howe, *Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, pp. 4-6.