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Boston's Celebration of Peace in 1783 and 1784

Myron F. Wehtje

At the beginning of 1783 Bostonians showed keen interest in the possibility of peace with Great Britain. Although the War for Independence was still in progress, the people of Boston knew that for more than a year there had been no significant military or naval encounters between the United States and Great Britain. However, it was well known that America's ally, France, was actively at war with Great Britain. Bostonians could not help wondering if that war would intensify or would soon end. News of the signing of preliminary articles of peace between the United States and Great Britain on November 30, 1782, left them in suspense, for those articles would not become effective until Great Britain reached a comparable agreement with France and Spain.

As the people of Boston waited, and speculated, rumors circulated freely. "Can there 'be so much smoke without some fire?" John Eliot asked in early February of 1783. He noted that most of the people in town expected news of peace soon. As the weeks passed, rumors thickened. Some people were pessimistic, fearing that a general, all-out war might erupt in Europe, forestalling peace between France and Great Britain and consequently preventing the making of a definitive treaty of peace between the United States and Great Britain. In mid-March, Benjamin Lincoln, Jr., wrote to his father from Boston: "The prospects of a peace with us begins to vanish. Some are apprehensive that if we should now have peace it would be an inglorious one." More optimistic townspeople eagerly scanned newspapers from New York, Philadelphia, the West Indies, Ireland, and London for word of an approaching peace.¹

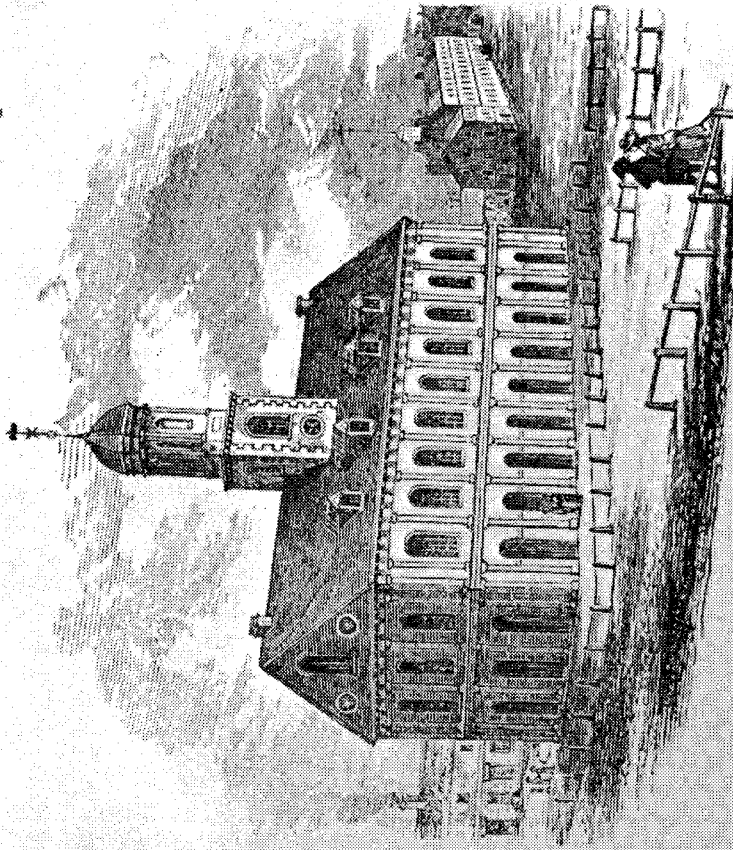
The long-awaited news of peace reached Boston the night of March 28, when Colonel John Trumbull arrived with a letter confirming the signing on January 20 of a general peace between the European belligerents. Now the Anglo-American peace could be implemented. In the weeks ahead the *Independent Chronicle*, Boston's best paper for reporting national and international developments, printed documents and news relating to the peace. Bostonians could read the text of the treaty between the United States and Great Britain, a declaration by the American peace commissioners on the ending of hostilities, a record of the debates in the British House of Commons on the treaty of peace, King George's proclamation declaring the cessation of arms, and the preliminary articles of peace between Great Britain and France. Meanwhile, on April 11 the

Confederation Congress proclaimed the end of the war. Four days later Congress ratified the provisional treaty of peace.²

When news of the actions of Congress reached Boston, the people realized that the time for celebration had finally come. Joseph Henderson, the sheriff of Suffolk County, formally proclaimed the peace from the balcony of the State House at one o'clock on April 23. Following the announcement, a "large concourse of the most respectable inhabitants" gave "three loud huzzas." Then thirteen-gun salutes were fired at both Castle Island, in the harbor, and at Fort Hill, in the southeastern part of town.³

In succeeding months both public and private congratulations on the peace were numerous. To John Scollay, a prominent selectman, the coming of peace was "this most Wonderful Event." He was grateful for the "adorable goodness of God" in bringing both peace and independence. A writer in the *Continental Journal* found reason for rejoicing in the fact that the peace terms were more favorable than he had expected. In the spirit of thanksgiving and congratulation, Governor John Hancock proclaimed May 15 a day of fasting and prayer. In his proclamation the governor observed that God had answered the prayers of the American people; therefore, they ought to humble themselves before Him and "profess our entire dependence upon His paternal care." The highlight of the day of fasting and prayer appears to have been a convocation in the Old South Meetinghouse. The speaker on that occasion, perhaps Joseph Eckley, the pastor of the Old South, asserted that Americans had never had a "greater cause for thankfulness" than in the arrival of peace.⁴

While the Bostonians celebrated, they recognized that there was not yet a definitive peace. They waited for almost a year before copies of the final articles of peace reached Boston in February 1784, prompting further celebrations, both public and private. A special town meeting voted against having a general illumination of the town, with candles in all of the windows and torches in the streets. Thinking it would be too dangerous, they agreed only to the illumination of Faneuil Hall. Nevertheless, a big public celebration occurred on February 27, 1784. The day opened with the ringing of bells and firing of cannon, which continued at intervals until night. At mid-day, military officers, public officials, and other dignitaries marched in a procession from the State House to the Old South, where a choir sang two anthems and Joseph Eckley preached. Following a procession back to the State House, the dignitaries and others in a large crowd listened to the reading of the peace proclamation from the balcony overlooking State Street. Thirteen cannon were then fired before another procession went to Faneuil Hall, where the dignitaries enjoyed an "elegant entertainment" at the expense of the town. As was customary on such occasions, patriotic toasts were drunk, and more cannon were fired. In the evening Governor Hancock entertained the principal men of the town at his house on Beacon Hill. At seven o'clock there were fireworks on the Common. Bonfires were also lit in Roxbury and on Dorchester Heights, to the south of town. Amidst the more spectacular developments of the day, some Bostonians paused to view transparent paintings featuring General George Washington and assorted infamous Britons, which were on display at the Philadelphia Coffee House in the North End, and on the balcony of Colonel John Marston's Bunch of Grapes



FANEUIL HALL, BEFORE ITS ENLARGEMENT.

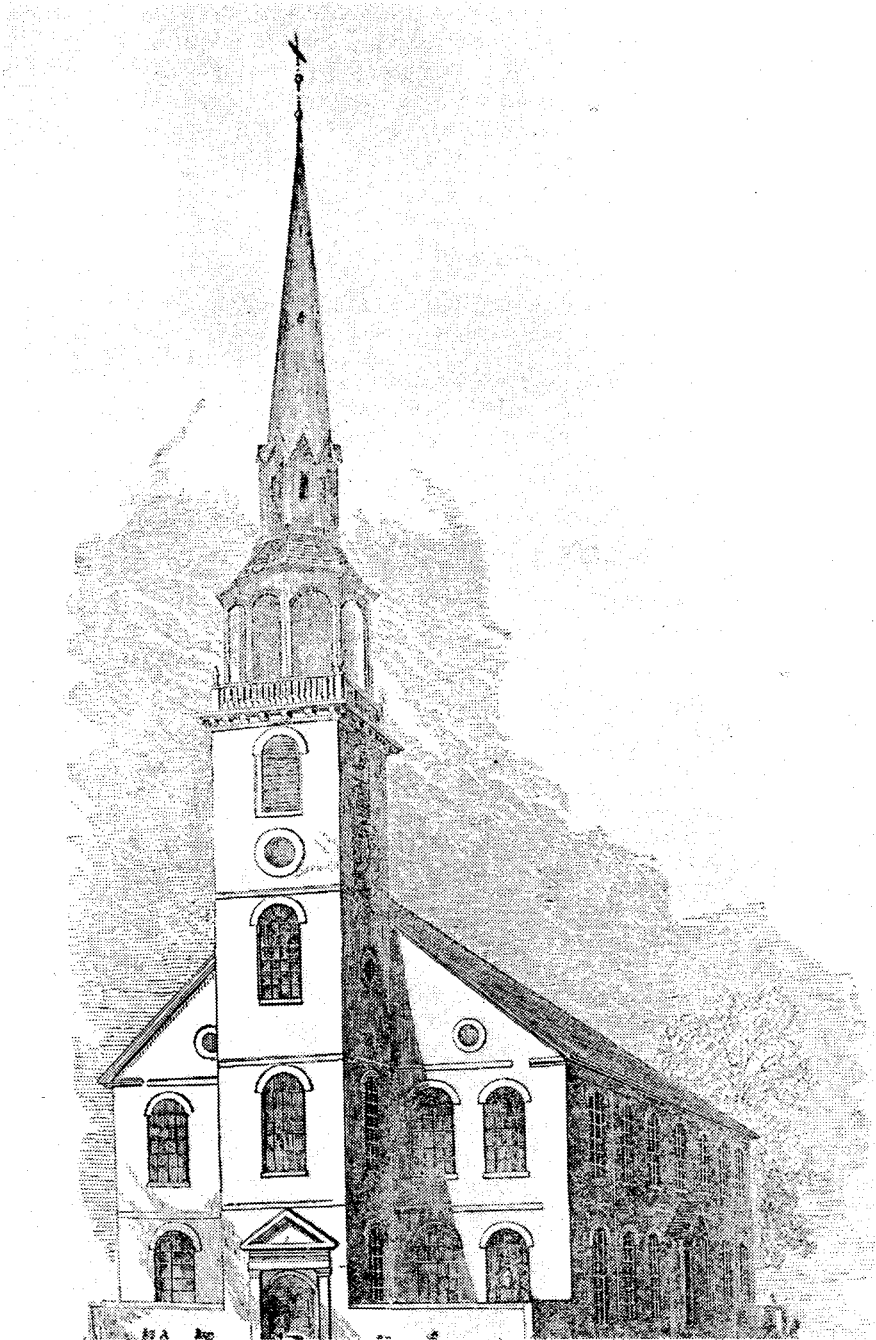
Faneuil Hall, from the collection of the Springfield City Library

Tavern on State Street.⁵

As this celebration, one of the largest of the period in Boston, came to an end, some of the townspeople realized that they were entering a new era. In 1783 and 1784 a number of Bostonians revealed their hopes and expectations for themselves and the nation. John Hancock, writing that he was "really worn out with public business," claimed to be looking forward to a return to private life. But the governor was also thinking of what the future might hold in store for the nation. He believed that the terms of the peace with Great Britain laid a "firm and lasting foundation for our security." James Sullivan, writing as "Consideration," felt a "growing pleasure" when he considered the "rising prospects" of the country. In a discourse on Thanksgiving Day in 1784, John Lathrop, the pastor of the Second Church, in the North End, had a great deal to say about the nation's prospects. With the blessing of a "general peace" and the preservation of national unity, the American states "must rise up to vast importance," he declared. Lathrop spoke of the opening of a new era—for the world, not just for America. "I cannot help thinking the affairs of the world are . . . rapidly meliorating," he said. Lathrop anticipated "far better times than the nations of men ever yet enjoyed." In his view, the "dark night of error and ignorance" was past; "the day of truth and knowledge" lay ahead. Elizabeth Smith wrote in a similar vein when she deplored the "decay of religion" during the recent war but hoped that the return of peace would "revive religion . . . in America and throughout the world."⁶

Other Bostonians found pleasure in contemplating the effects of the example that America was setting for the rest of the world. In the fall of 1783 James Sullivan commented on the "happy consequences which are constantly flowing to the world from independence." Foreign governments would have to treat their subjects well, he thought, to keep them from emigrating to America. Another writer was pleased that the "present age seems to second every attempt to recover freedom, civil and ecclesiastic." Ireland, for example, was said to have "caught the fire of patriotism" from the United States. The writer was also pleased by developments in France and the German states which seemed to reflect the influence of the United States.⁷

Samuel Adams and some other Bostonians were rather nervous about this interest in the Old World. They feared that Americans might lose sight of their own interests if they became zealous for the welfare of other nations. The peace would be enduring, Adams believed, only if the United States would "never intermeddle with the quarrels of other nations."⁸ A writer in the *Continental Journal* agreed, declaring that Americans should "by no means . . . suffer ourselves, either from gratitude or any other principle, to engage in any future controversies or quarrels on the other side of the Atlantic." Otherwise, he suggested, the nation might lose its independence. Thinking no doubt of France, the same writer cautioned further against an "unreserved confidence in any court, however apparently well disposed." Americans had no reason to "believe it is the wish of any power in Europe to facilitate, much less expedite, the growth of these United States any further than their respective interests coincide with the increase of it." The writer enjoined his countrymen to give their attention to their own commerce and agriculture.⁹ In urging that the nation have as



Old South Meetinghouse, from the collections of the Springfield City Library

little as possible to do with the Old World, Samuel Adams wrote that Americans must circumspectly pursue their own national interest—and trust in God.”¹⁰ As they celebrated the peace, then, Bostonians had a sense of the importance of the new nation that had emerged from a long, difficult war and a feeling of optimism about its future. Two hundred years later we must conclude that their hopeful celebration has been vindicated.

NOTES

1. John Eliot to Jeremy Belknap, Feb. 4, 1783, “Belknap Papers: Part III: Miscellaneous Letters and Papers, 1724-1798,” Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, 6th Ser., IV (Boston, 1891), 241; Benjamin Lincoln, Jr., to Benjamin Lincoln, March 17, 1783, Benjamin Lincoln Papers (microfilm), MHS, Boston; *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser*, Feb. 20 and 27; and March 13, 1783.
2. *The Boston Evening-Post and the General Advertiser*, March 29, 1783; *The Independent Ledger and the American Advertiser*, March 31, 1783; *Indep. Chronicle*, April 10, 17, and 24, 1783.
3. *Re-Dedication of the Old State House, Boston, July 11, 1882* (Boston, 1882), 94.
4. John Scollay to Samuel Phillips Savage, May 22, 1783, S. P. Savage Papers, II, MHS; *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, May 8, 1783; *Indep. Chronicle*, May 1, 1783; “Sermon Preached at the Old South, May 15, 1783,” MS, in Early Sermons, MHS.
5. G. B. Warden, Boston, 1689-1776 (Boston, 1970), 340, 341; *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), 1; *Indep. Chronicle*, March 4, 1784.
6. Hancock’s sentiments are in his letter to Capt. James Scott, Nov. 14, 1783, John Hancock Letter Book (1762-1783), Hancock Family Papers, Baker Library, Harvard Univ., Cambridge, Mass. Sullivan’s letter is in *The Boston Gazette and the Country Journal*, Oct. 13, 1783. On Sullivan’s use of the pseudonym “Consideration,” see the James Sullivan Papers, MHS. Lathrop’s discourse was published as *A Discourse on the Peace: Preached on the Day of Thanksgiving, November 25, 1784* (Boston, 1784), 25, 32, 33, 35. For Mrs. Smith’s views, see her letter to Rev. Isaac Smith, Jr., June 30, 1783, Smith-Townsend Papers, MHS.
7. “Consideration,” *Boston Gazette*, Oct. 13, 1783; *The Exchange Advertiser*, Dec. 30, 1784.
8. Samuel Adams to Arthur Lee, April 21, 1783, in Harry Alonzo Cushing, ed., *The Writings of Samuel Adams* (New York, 1968 reprint), IV, 281.
9. *Continental Journal*, May 8, 1783.
10. Samuel Adams to Richard Henry Lee, Dec. 23, 1784, *Writings of Samuel Adams*, IV, 390-391.