

A Perfect Moment

"The American Revolution did not start with "the shot heard round the world" on the morning of April 19, 1775."

By 1774, the Crown's General Gage understood that the revolution had already been won in the hearts, souls and incredibly powerful resistance of the farmer patriots throughout the shire towns and countryside of the Bay Colony. By the autumn of 1774, Worcester County patriots had already changed the course of history. Even in our hometowns of Mendon and Sutton, from which hundreds of its farmer patriots were participants in this dramatic revolution, the ompelling facts had not been recognized until award-winning author and historian Ray Raphael uncovered the first American Revolution that history had overlooked. Yet it is inarguably, America's "Greatest Moment of Democracy."

These determined patriots changed the course of history forever. They were joined by farmers in Barrington, Springfield, and Braintree who gathered to overthrow the heavy-handed tactics of the Crown by shutting down their Courts. These farmers had never been so full of fear and rage as they saw the checks and balances of the Courts erode and solely favor the Crown. But the most dramatic scene occurred along the shire town of Worcester's dusty Main Street when nearly 5000 farmer patriots stood peacefully, yet forcefully in a struggle for freedom where participatory democracy has never again rung so true.

Almost a year before the noted 1775 April Alarm, the "Flames of Sedition" were starting to spread throughout the countryside where 95% of Massachusetts residents lived. The port of Boston was still controlled by the Crown's military forces and many of the educated elite had assembled in Philadelphia to decide whether they should wrest control away from the Crown. But at meeting houses and taverns, the farmers and shopkeepers were preparing and reacting in rage to the loss of representation and oversight they once had to assure fairness in the Courts.

The 1691 Charter, which assured a system of checks and balances, had been revoked by the Crown. The Crown had always chosen the governor of the Bay Colony, who in turn appointed most officials, such as the sheriff, judges, tax collector and other officials, but these appointments had to be approved by the Council, whose members were elected by residents. Elected Council members were usually the wealthy and educated elite whose families exerted great power throughout their respective counties, but the common voters also knew that they could competently record deeds and understand the increasingly complex legal system.

Most farmers and craftsmen were concerned with local issues - the struggle of daily life trying to grow crops on rocky soils or tend to church or local Town Meeting duties. Yet the contrasts of wealth between the educated elite and yeoman farmers was growing significantly while the rise of the "strolling poor" and landless was starting to increase as generations split up original land holdings again and again. Debts for farmers were growing steadily and historians have found that up to 22% of the farmers were facing litigation for unpaid debt. Courts had tremendous power to seize a farmer's property, so this was a growing concern in the years leading up to the Revolution.

A farmer's worst fear was losing his land. "In the early 1760s, Massachusetts had little reason to suspect this might happen. By the summer of 1774, they had every reason

to believe that it would."* In 1765, the Stamp Act was enacted by the Crown to force additional taxes upon colonists to pay off the debt of the French and Indian War. This created a huge outcry and resistance from colonists. The schism between the elite landowners as representatives to the Massachusetts Council and local farmers was growing.

Worcester's elected officials, Timothy Paine and John Chandler, tried to straddle both sides and say nothing. But thirty two names of Stamp Act supporters were published in the Boston Gazette on March 31, 1766 after which more than half were voted out of office. Times were restless and the educated elite officials were no longer unquestioned as they straddled two masters, the Crown and their electorate.

By 1766, the political monopoly of the Chandlers ended when Ephraim Doolittle was elected as representative to the General Court. He and his supporters demanded changes, including: transparency of governmental affairs, an end to plurality of office holding and bribery and most radically, an end to tariffs and the repeal of operating a Latin school. Worcester citizens wanted their children to be educated in reading, writing and arithmetic, not some elite language only for scholars.

Though the Crown finally repealed the Stamp Act, the Townshend Revenue Act was enacted in 1768 to place heavy export taxes on British goods. The House reacted with a strong statement against the taxes but the Crown demanded that the House rescind its original letter or the General Court would be dissolved. Within two years, the Crown also paid its officials directly, taking away the little control local citizens had left over its officials. By November 1772, Boston radicals formed a Committee of Correspondence at their Town Meeting to write a letter, known as the Boston pamphlet, to all 260 towns to request that they state their sentiments on the Crown's controlling efforts. It also listed numerous grievances against the Crown, including "We cannot, when we think of the depravity of mankind, avoid looking with horror on the danger to which we are exposed."

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Reaction from Bay State communities was strong and vociferous. Worcester had 41 petitioners request that the Boston pamphlet be presented at Town Meeting in March 1773. Town Meeting voted that Timothy Bigelow, William Young and John Smith serve as a standing committee of correspondence. But it went further than that in the Chandler-Paine Tory stronghold territory. After the Boston Tea Party, in December 1773, Bigelow and other patriots formed the APS, the American Political Party, which as a private club, no longer had to discuss its objectives at Town Meeting. These members were dedicated to prepare against the enemy, which included the Crown as well as local Tories who were creditors and judges who posed constant threat to local farmers and craftsmen.

By March 7, 1774, the 71 member APS had altered the course of local politics by

electing three members of their party as Selectmen yet maintaining Timothy Paine, a moderate Tory. No longer was there a Chandler in elective office. The most pressing issues facing the new Board of Selectmen were: the Crown's direct payment of officials and judges and the exorbitant taxes without representation. They wrote a statement that the Town resolved not to purchase British tea and also to boycott anyone who sold contraband tea.

The local Tories were enraged and many decades later, local historian, Charles Hersey, recalled the stories he heard of his elders as a young boy:

"The Tories were pale with rage. James Putnam, leader of the Tories and the best lawyer in North America, known for his sound reasoning and oratory skills, arose. He made a speech against the resolutions as had never been heard before in Worcester;" and when he sat down, it was said that "not a man of the Whig party thought a single word could be said, and that old man Putnam, the Tory, had wiped them all out. Blacksmith Timothy Bigelow at length arose, without learning, without practice in public speaking, without wealth which the Tories of Worcester had, but there he stood upon the floor of the Old South Church, met the Goliath of his day, and fully vanquished him. (p 43)

Local Blackstone Valley town histories of Town Meetings, such as Benedict's History of Sutton 1704-1876 reports that on January 11, 1773, a committee of seven men was formed to "obtain redress under such pressing and alarming Grievances." (p.89) By the following year, at Town Meetings, votes were taken to collect monies for arms, ammunition and militia training. It was declared that all men, 16 to 60, should be armed with bayonet, good firearm and accoutrements as well as be trained in their use.

Two months later, the Crown's new Bay colony governor, General Thomas Gage, replaced Thomas Hutchinson and the port of Boston was officially closed in retaliation for the Boston Tea Party. The Boston Correspondence Committee sent out another letter to which Leicester citizens responded if the Crown asserts "the right to dispose of private property" by shutting down Boston's port, then it might also stop any town or person from sowing grain, mowing grass, so long as his majesty thinks proper." Rage against the Crown could be heard in virtually every tavern and another boycott called the Solemn League and Covenant was crafted.

But General Gage acted quickly as Governor, rejecting thirteen of the 28 men chosen by voters as representatives to the Council. In addition, the Massachusetts Act was enacted on August 6, 1774 which implemented further controls by the Crown. Reactions were immediate as this new Act threatened each and every citizen.

Just three days later, fifty two patriots from twenty-two towns in Worcester County met at Mary Stearns Tavern in Worcester to create a committee and draft resolutions of protest. Large amounts of ale and rum were drunk in the process but by the following morning, two letters were approved to "oppose the tyranny rushing upon us." Resolutions, based upon Lockean principles and closely aligned with the 1691 Charter, were written and approved three weeks later at the county convention.

August 16, 1774 was the scheduled day in the shire town of Barrington for the first Court session to be held since the Massachusetts Act was announced. But while General Gage was administering oaths of loyalty to the Crown for thirteen councilors to replace those he had rejected, over 1500 patriots closed down the Barrington courthouse. Most of the frightened judges returned to Boston as they were now fearful of living in their hometown communities.

In preparation of Worcester's August 22, 1774 Town Meeting, the American Political Society met the preceding week to draft articles of surrender where the fifty-two Tories

would be forced to reject their earlier Tory Protest recorded by Clerk Chandler. A resolution to command Selectmen to inventory and ascertain a proper amount of arms and ammunition was also drafted.

By Sunday evening before Monday's Town Meeting, most of the Tories had recanted their Protest, yet five held firm: William Paine, James Putnam and three others.

Monday's long Town Meeting continued to Wednesday evening whereupon a resolution was passed "that the town clerk, in the presence of the town, obliterate, erase, or otherwise deface the said recorded protest, and the names thereto subscribed, so that it may become utterly illegible and unintelligible."

So there it was... John Chandler's son, Town Clerk Clark Chandler, was forced to draw his pen, line by line, through the Tory Protest, in public view. But that still was not enough as he was forced to draw loop upon loop of ink and then forced to dip his own fingers in the ink to smudge out detectable words across the twenty-three page document. It appears that the protestors themselves were also forced to ink over their own names.

By August 27, thousands of farmer patriots had arrived from Grafton, Sutton, Oxford, Shrewsbury, Brookfield, Mendon, Leicester and beyond to force recantation of the Tory Protest by the remaining five holdouts. Nearly 500 came from Sutton alone. Most left their arms outside Worcester but they were determined not to fail in demanding representation.

They assembled at Paine's home first and eventually, he recanted. Still, that was not enough. Paine was led through lines of orderly patriots until he reached the center and was told to shout his resignation to the Crown aloud. Up to 32 times, so that every common man in attendance, would hear equally Paine's recantation to the Crown and the Tory Protest. Each individual patriot would hear his word, perhaps the fairest, most orderly yet demanding crowd ever to assemble towards a common goal - freedom from the unfair and harsh constraints of the Crown.

By noon, the crowd had dissipated; some had traveled to Rutland for Murray's recantation although he and other Tories had escaped to Boston, never to return to their hometowns.

Though General Gage eventually referred to this crowd as a mob, Paine's words in his letter to Gage describe something very different: an impressive and orderly assembly showing the vast power of the common people. Paine truly hoped the Governor would avoid using military power as many of these patriots were unarmed.

Yet, the prospect of Gage ordering troops into Worcester on September 6 was foremost in the patriots' minds. They had methods to disavow loyalists to the Crown, such as immediately leaving church when a Tory entered or boycotting their shops and goods. Early drafted resolutions from patriots used a clause "in every Way that shall not be productive of Carnage and Bloodshed" but how could they respond if the British came using military force? Finally, language evolved that allowed patriots to respond with methods that they saw fit, allowing military force to be used against the Crown's military force. By the end of August, the patriots had such control that every official loyal to the Crown would not dare step out from Boston, which was heavily guarded by the Crown's forces.

Two weeks before the September 6, 1774 Court session scheduled in Worcester, General Gage reacted to Salem, which had conducted a Town Meeting without his approval. The Meeting had finished its business before the Crown's 59th Regiment appeared, but General Gage ordered that those who called the Meeting be arrested. Some who were arrested paid bail, but others resisted and told the General that he would "have

to abide by the consequences" if they were kept in jail.

It is important to remember that the crops were grown and needed harvesting; the very sustainability for the long, hard winter of these proud and noble farmers was already at risk as they spent many long days and nights traveling and meeting on these urgent matters.

Gage backed down and released these prisoners seven months and twenty four days before the "shot heard round the world." Gage then sent spies to Worcester who confirmed Worcester County's powerful resistance. "In Worcester, they keep no terms, openly threaten resistance by arms and threaten to attack anyone who resists them. Mr. Ruggles of the new Council is afraid to take his seat as Judge of the Inferior Court and I apprehend that I shall have to march a body of Troops into that Township to preserve the peace." But with further thought, Gage determined his efforts would be suicidal.

Finally, on the morning of September 6, 4,622 militiamen from 37 communities assembled, according to Westborough's Reverend Parkman's diary. Most were unarmed because General Gage had decided not to mobilize his troops to Worcester. Yet perhaps for the first and only time in our country's history, "unlike in Boston, the leaders and people were one." (133) Though the political structure for hearing every voice was burdensome, each militia company chose a representative to consult with their constituents before any resolutions or votes could be taken. This was a huge task but eventually at midday on September 7, 1774, it was decided that court officers would walk for a quarter of a mile between the tavern and the Courthouse in front of about five thousand militia and citizens lined along the street, with hats off to repeat over and over again, so that all who gathered, could easily hear the disavowal of holding courts under the new Act. Other Tory supporters were also forced to recant their loyalty to the Crown and the Massachusetts Act.

The British control over Worcester County was gone forever - without violence, yet with a humiliating retraction of loyalty to the crown over and over again, for all to witness and hear equally. Boston patriots, used to deferential and elite leadership shared some ideals, but never understood fully participatory democracy as Worcester County farmer patriots did. Evidence firmly suggests that the revolution had already been won on the streets of Worcester, seven months before the "shot heard round the world."

Of course, there would be further military battles initiated by General Gage in less fortified regions that fill our history books, but it was the passion, fear, and pursuit of freedom of our rural Worcester County and Blackstone Valley farmers and artisans who changed the course of American history forever.