

From Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*: “The Genie Unbottled”

The common understanding of the final breach between the American colonists and the British government in July 1776 centers on the story of the Continental Congress’s tortured decision to declare independence, and the consequent imperative to establish a government that would unite thirteen colonies under the Articles of Confederation. But the colonies had already been through a decade of establishing quasi-governments at the local level—North Carolina, New York, and New Hampshire are examples we have explored—to address problems that were home-bred, not imperial. Those who for decades held little formal power had begun seizing the levers of government in order to find solutions to festering internal problems. Some of these reform efforts failed, as with the Regulators at Alamance in 1771. Others succeeded partially, as in the case of the Green Mountain Boys, who stared down New York’s elite-controlled provincial government. But regardless of whether they won all they wanted, the process of standing ruling power on its head accustomed ordinary people to think about themselves as agents of history rather than the passive recipients of whatever history had in mind for them.

This heady notion of grasping history by the throat spread through the widely separated and poorly connected parts of the colonial eastern seaboard. Congress had nurtured the idea of popular participation in government by calling for the enforcement of the Continental Association through locally-constructed committees in every town and county. But even without this encouragement, plebeian elements of society nearly everywhere displayed a new assertiveness in the public arena. Even in South Carolina, which of all the colonies had the most entrenched political rule by a narrow elite, men accustomed to commanding others rather than listening to them saw their power under attack. “Men of property,” wrote Lieutenant Governor William Bull in March 1775, “begin at length to see that the many-headed power of the people, who have hitherto been obediently made use of by their numbers and occasional riots to support the claims set up in America, have discovered their own strength and importance and are not now so easily governed by their former leaders.” In Salem, Massachusetts, a town of fishermen and maritime artisans, the mighty merchant William Pynchon complained bitterly that “the threats and insults of the rabble have been insupportable to many.” In the process of providing the determination and sheer physical presence in the streets to enforce nonimportation and nonconsumption, the “body of the people” had targeted the wealthy. “People of property,” continued Pynchon, “had been so often threatened and insulted that at length several more proposed to leave the town of Salem.”

Of course, the wealthy were particularly susceptible to attacks on their persons and property if they were known to oppose the nonimportation association, or continued to advertise their loyalty to the Crown or counseled reconciliation rather than armed resistance in the final months before July 1776 Daniel Coxe, a leading member of New Jersey's council, the political club of the well-heeled that served the Loyalist royal governor (Benjamin Franklin's son), expressed the elite's horror of the popular force that had been unleashed: "What then have men of property not to fear and apprehend, and particularly those who happen and are known to differ in sentiments from the generality? They become a mark at once for popular fury, and those who are esteemed friends to government, devoted for destruction. They are not even allowed to preserve a neutrality, and passiveness becomes a crime. Those who are not for us are against us is the cry, and public necessity calls for and will justify their destruction, both life and property." In Philadelphia, "Candidus" made the connection between Loyalism and upper-class pretensions to aristocratic rule.

Sounding very much like Thomas Young, he wrote that those opposing independence were the "petty tyrants" who could best "carry on their oppressions, vexations, and depredations" by keeping Americans under British rule. "They tell you," wrote Candidus, "they had rather be governed by the mild and wise laws of Great Britain than the decrees of an American mob.... If the people by any means obtain an adequate share in the legislature of this country, they know their visions of golden mountains, and millions of acres of tenanted soil, will all vanish, and themselves remain in the despised rank of their honest and contented neighbors."<sup>75</sup>

A common interpretation of the surging popular sentiment is that the elite, having need of the masses, could not put the genie, once released, back in the bottle. Much of this interpretation is based on elite contemporary opinion at the time. For example, New York's Loyalist council, advising Governor Tryon, warned the Continental Congress in June 1775 that "contests for liberty, fostered in their infancy by the virtuous and wise, become sources of power to wicked and designing men; from whence it follows that such controversies as we are now engaged in frequently end in the demolition of those rights and privileges which they were instituted to defend."<sup>76</sup> "Wicked and designing men" were here understood to be the likes of Ethan Alien, and the "rights and privileges" under attack were the rights of wealthy landowners, with questionable land titles, to evict and beleaguer ordinary farmers.

It was not only wealthy colonists committed to Loyalism who quivered at what the

struggles in the streets portended. Even the heartiest upper-class proponents of independence felt themselves under attack, knowing that beneath them stood men in great numbers who experienced class oppression firsthand and were learning to express themselves openly. Philadelphia's wealthy James Alien, who had joined the militia to demonstrate his patriotism, despaired in March 1776, "The mobility [is] triumphant.... I love the cause of liberty; but... the madness of the multitude is but one degree better than submission to the Tea Act." The time was now at hand when men of this kind would have to decide. Weighing heavily on their minds were bitter charges that they were the "great folks," as "A Common Man" writing in a New York paper put it, who "are the only gainers from arbitrary government," men who lie in bed with English officials "to enable them to carry on their wicked and greedy schemes of stripping and oppressing the body of the people."<sup>77</sup>

Waverers faced similar sentiments, and many were driven off the fence to stand with their king for fear of the politically charged, street-savvy people. In New Jersey, struggling to decide which way to turn, lawyer Gouverneur Morris believed that the aristocracy of which he was a part would not survive American independence. In the end, he cast his die with independence, but he spent most of the war years worrying about the power of the people. So did John Adams. Nobody doubted John Adams's stance on independence, and it was common knowledge that the still struggling young lawyer had no mansion, four-wheeled carriage, slaves, or other accoutrements of wealth. Adams had nothing to fear from those who railed against the pyramid of wealth and power, and his reading of the classics told him that republics collapsed at just this stage of evolutionary development. But Adams was temperamentally conservative, had little appetite for a thorough democratization of colonial society, above all prized social stability, and therefore was nervous about the rising masses. In writing to Patrick Henry, a man with deeply democratic sensibilities, Adams could sound liberal: "The dons, the bashaws, the grandees, the patricians, the sachems, the nabobs, call them by what name you please, sigh, and groan, and fret, and sometimes stamp, and foam, and curse, but all in vain," he wrote one month before the Declaration of Independence. "The decree is gone forth, and it cannot be recalled, that a more equal liberty than has prevailed in other parts of the earth, must be established in America." Adams commended this because he knew from firsthand experience that the Hutchinsons, Olivers, and other Bostonians with princely fortunes had scorned and exploited the ordinary citizens who had always been on the razor's edge that separated those with a "decent competency," as it was often called, from poverty. "That

exuberance of pride, which has produced an insolent domination in a few, a very few, opulent, monopolizing families,” Adams ventured, “will be brought down nearer to the confines of ; reason and moderation than they have been used to.... It will do them good in this world, and in every other.” In the same vein, looking south, Adams regretted the “inequality of property” and worried that “the gentry are very rich and the common people very poor.” This, he believed, “gives an aristocratical turn to all their proceedings and occasions a strong aversion in their patricians to Common Sense.” If they could not swallow Paine’s *Common Sense*, Adams concluded, “the spirit of these barons ... must submit.”<sup>78</sup>

Yet Adams, especially in his public pronouncements, had nervous fits about the leveling spirit breaking out in all the colonies. It was one thing to J bring the high and mighty down a rung or two, but quite another to allow those on the bottom rungs to spring upward. Like his cousin Sam, he believed that in a republic the distance between rich and poor should not be too great. But if this leveling of income and wealth shaded into indiscipline or challenges to the authority of the well-born and educated, he saw the beast of anarchy beckoning. Writing from Philadelphia to Abigail, who was tending the farm and raising their four children in Braintree, Massachusetts, three hundred miles to the north, Adams complained that “our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere. That children and apprentices were disobedient—that schools and colleges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their masters.”<sup>79</sup> This casting off of deference disturbed Adams. Released from the bottle, could the genie ever be recaptured?

That the genie was not always masculine also troubled Adams. His wife Abigail tasked him on just this issue. Her husband’s long absences from home and the strain of running their farm by herself just outside British-occupied Boston, along with the death of her mother in the fall of 1775, all seemed to bring her to a new state of consciousness about what the looming revolution might hold for the women who were playing such an important role in the nonimportation and homespun movements. “In the Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make,” she wrote John on March 31, 1776, “I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors.” In this much quoted passage, Abigail went from desire to demand. “Do not put such unlimited power into the hand of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.” A few

paragraphs earlier Abigail had wondered about just how real the “passion for liberty” was among those who still kept fellow humans enslaved. Now she pushed the point home about men enslaving women. “That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex.”<sup>80</sup>

In this letter we see clearly how women of Abigail Adams’s intellectual mettle nimbly made the connection between civil and domestic government. The more male leaders railed against England’s intentions to “enslave” its colonial “subjects,” to rule arbitrarily, to act tyrannically, the more American women began to rethink their own marital situations. The language of protest against England reminded many American women that they too were badly treated “subjects”—the subjects of husbands who often dealt with them cruelly and exercised power over them arbitrarily. Most American women, still bound by the social conventions of the day, were not yet ready to organize in behalf of greater rights. But the protests against England stirred up new thoughts about what seemed arbitrary or despotic in their own society, and many women began to think that what had been endured in the past was no longer acceptable. This paved the way for change. Abigail’s reference to the cruelty men used against their wives probably refers to the “rule of thumb” that the law upheld. Deeply imbedded in England’s common law, and encoded in Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, the rule of thumb made it permissible for husbands to beat their wives so long as the stick or club did not exceed the thickness of a male thumb. The reference to using women with indignity probably referred to the emotional and psychological domination of wives by husbands. For all his love of Abigail, John’s reply to her letter of March 31, 1776, confirmed the point. “As to your extraordinary code of laws,” he wrote, “I cannot but laugh.” Then referring to the growing insubordination of children, apprentices, Indians, slaves, and college students, he sniffed that “your letter was the first intimation that another tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a compliment but you are so saucy, I won’t blot it out.”<sup>81</sup>

Adams was less than honest in saying that he had no notion of women’s discontent. Adams knew very well of James Otis’s 1764 *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*, in which his lawyer friend had included in an “Introduction of the Origin of

Government” the time bomb of a question: “Are not women born as free as men?” and followed it up with the query that, if this was so, then had not “every man and woman ... a natural and equitable right to be consulted in the choice of a new king or in the formation of a new original compact or government if any new form had been made?” At Yale, seniors had recently debated “Whether women ought to be admitted, into the Magistracy and Government of Empires and Republics”—a telling indication that the concept of a political woman was now a matter of public discussion. But rather than open up the topic for further comment, Adams drew a line in the sand. “Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems.” He claimed that the laws subordinating women “are little more than theory,” and that men “dare not exert our power in its full latitude.” Since “we are obliged to go fair and softly” with women, men would not allow themselves to be subjected to “the despotism of the petticoat.” Adams was seemingly trying to disarm his wife with humor by saying that it appeared to him that the British ministry, after stirring up “Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, [and] Scotch Renegadoes, at last... have stimulated the [women] to demand new privileges and threaten to rebel.” But doubtless he had limited tolerance for change in women’s rights and opportunities. When Abigail saw to it that their oldest daughter, Nabby, studied Latin, John did not oppose it but warned that Abigail “must not tell many people of it, for it is scarcely reputable for young ladies to understand Latin and Greek.”<sup>82</sup>

Abigail was not amused. She knew that it was not the British ministry that stirred up women and others grating against their subordination. Instead of writing John after receiving his dismissive letter, she unburdened herself to her friend Mercy Otis Warren, the sister of John Otis and wife of James Warren, a Massachusetts legislator. “He is very saucy to me in return for a list of female grievances which I transmitted to him,” she wrote Mercy. “I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress.” Why, she wondered, was her husband so insensitive to what seemed an opportunity to enact a more “generous plan,” “some laws in our favor upon just and liberal principles” by which the law would curb “the power of the arbitrary and tyrannic to injure us with impunity?” Under revised law, women could gain court protection against abusive husbands and not lose their property and wages to men once they married. For raising just and liberal principles, she bitterly told Mercy, he scoffed at her and called her saucy. “So I have helped the sex abundantly,” she closed, “but I will tell him I have only been making trial of the disinterestedness of his virtue, and when weighed in the balance have found

it wanting.”<sup>83</sup> Mercy Otis Warren, who had already crossed the boundaries of correct female behavior by writing two patriot plays that pilloried Thomas Hutchinson and other Loyalists, sympathized with Abigail and told other women that the criticism of females who interested themselves in politics should be resisted.

Abigail stewed about John’s dismissiveness and waited far longer than was her habit before answering his letter of April 14. “I believe tis near ten days since I wrote you a line,” she wrote on May 7. “I have not felt in a humor to entertain you. If I had taken up my pen perhaps some unbecoming invective might have fallen from it.” Then she let out the steam building in her on the matter of women’s rights. “I can not say that I think you very generous to the ladies, for ... you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives.” Again, she was using the same catchwords and phrases so familiar from the years of protesting British arrogance and insensitivity—“absolute power,” “tyranny,” “unlimited power.” “You must remember,” she continued, “that arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken—and notwithstanding all your wise laws and maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet.” In this reference to Lysistrata, who rallied the Grecian women to withhold their sexual favors from husbands who would not listen to their pleas for peace, Abigail played her last card—at least for now. When John received her latest parry on the question of arbitrary and tyrannical men, he chose to withhold further comment. It was not that he put the matter out of mind. Rather he chose to express his dismay and horror to James Sullivan, superior court judge in Massachusetts and member of the legislature, who had offered his view that prop-ertyless adult men should be allowed the vote. “Depend upon it, Sir,” Adams wrote Sullivan: “There will be no end of it” if propertyless men were given the vote. “Women will demand a vote.” Young lads would be next. “It tends to confound and destroy all distinctions and prostrate all ranks to one common level.”<sup>84</sup>

Adams tried to end the argument on a high note by complimenting Abigail as a “Stateswoman” as well as “a Farmeress.” But for Abigail, the matter was not closed. Years later she insisted that “I will never consent to have our sex considered in an inferior point of light. Let each planet shine in their own orbit. God and nature designed it so—if man is Lord, woman is Lordess—that is what I contend for.”<sup>85</sup> Like a stone cast into a pond, ripples radiated outward from this family argument—a private argument auguring currents of change far beyond the Adams family.