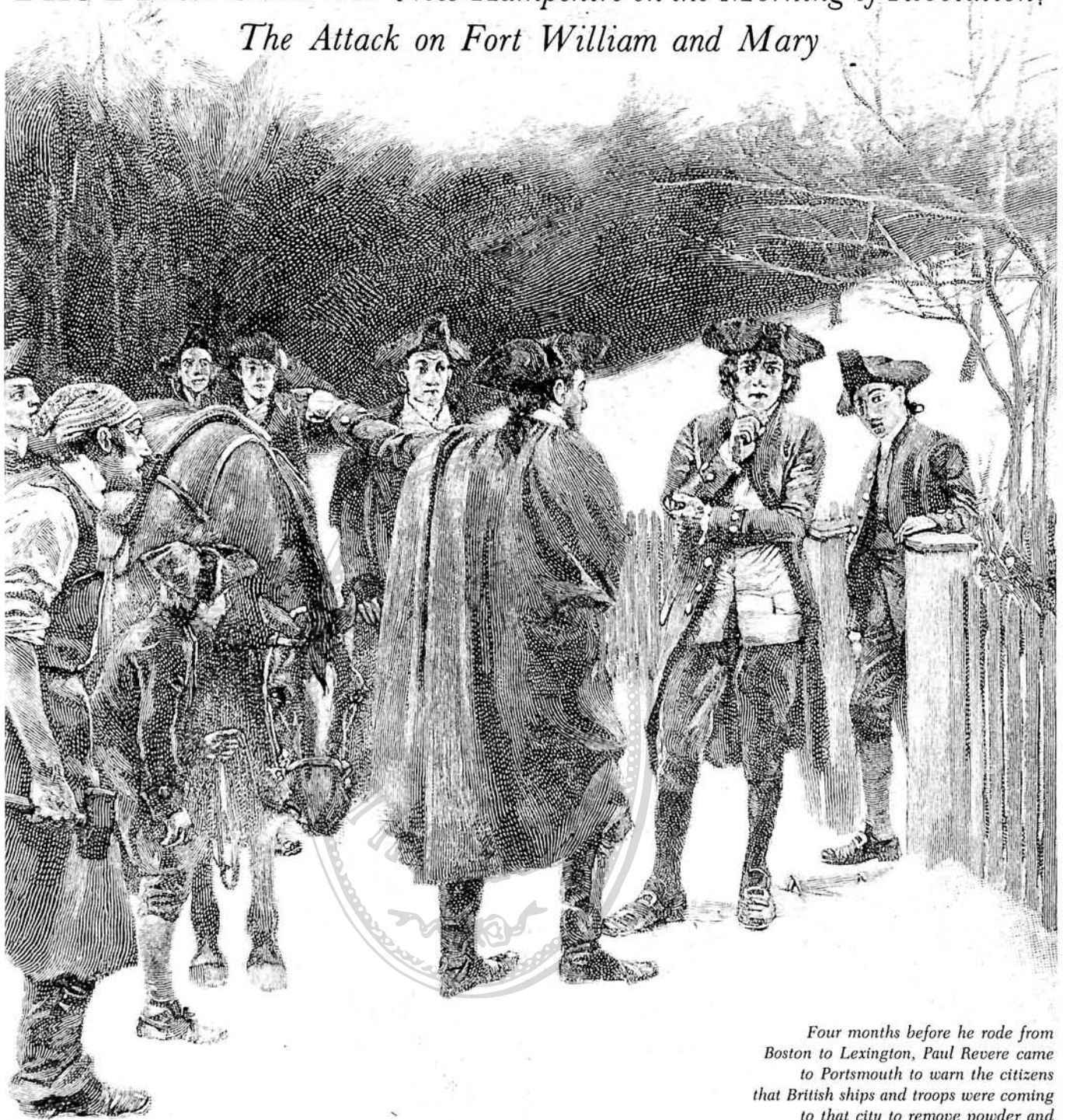


# The Final Straws. *New Hampshire on the Morning of Revolution; The Attack on Fort William and Mary*



by Anne and Charles W. Eastman Jr.

Four months before he rode from Boston to Lexington, Paul Revere came to Portsmouth to warn the citizens that British ships and troops were coming to that city to remove powder and other military stores from Fort William and Mary, the British fort in New Castle.

On December 13, 1774, Revere rode to Portsmouth with the news and on the next day the fort was raided. This engraving, and the others in this section, were drawn by Howard Pyle and first appeared in *Harper's New Magazine*, July 1886. The original caption and the accompanying story have Revere arriving at the Durham home of John Sullivan, but contemporary historians now believe that Revere went to Portsmouth.





(above) Fort William and Mary, now Fort Constitution, today. The fort shares the site with the United States Coast Guard. The interior walls of the fort are the oldest with others constructed prior to the Civil War and the Spanish American War. Jon Kimball photograph. (right) In preparation for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the raids on the fort, some of the exterior walls have been repainted and repaired and the portcullis has been reconstructed and placed at the gate. The New Hampshire Division of State Parks now has responsibility for the care of the facility. An adjacent building has a display tracing the history of the fort. Peter E. Randall photograph.



BY 1765, Benning Wentworth, Royal Governor of the Province of New Hampshire, had already spent twenty-five years creating a highly structured system of political monopoly. Using a sophisticated method of patronage, family intermarriage, clever investments, and absolute control of the "King's Woods," the Wentworths together with their relatives the Jaffreys, Peirces, Ridges and Warners had constructed the most hierarchical and extended dynasty in colonial America.

The "dynastic seat" and the most public display of their wealth and power was the Provincial capital — Portsmouth. It boasted mansions, theaters, taverns, a market place and well over 4,000 inhabitants. The masts

of ships and gundalows provided a backdrop for the stately homes and served as ubiquitous reminders of the tons of fish, fur and lumber upon which its economy was based. The city had a cosmopolitan flavor which was unlike that of any other New Hampshire community. A wide variety of peoples added their presence to its uniqueness; Indians, Negroes, English and Scotch-Irish all had migrated toward the hub of New Hampshire commerce.

Although the Wentworths undoubtedly felt secure at the apex of political and economic power, there were forces at work which were destined to crumble the empire in less than a decade. Already in 1765 there were signs of internal weakening. The

decreasing demand for masts and lumber as a result of the Treaty of Paris, as well as a general oversupply of lumber commodities weakened the dynasty's economic leverage. At the very time, moreover, when demand for merchantable lumber was decreasing, the number of towns and population centers was increasing at a remarkable rate. Kingston, for example, had about 462 inhabitants in 1725, but by 1767 its population had more than doubled. Portsmouth itself had grown from a mere 300 in 1686 to a metropolis of more than 4,466 by 1767.

Statewide, the same phenomenal growth could be discerned. Between 1767 and 1780 its population was destined to double and 118 new towns





were to be incorporated! This dynamic growth of towns and populations with its attendant transition from executive to popular government in the form of town meetings, as well as the sheer logistics of governmental control given the physical barriers and distances involved, rapidly reduced the political leverage of the Wentworth clan. Throughout the period of their "hold" on the Province, the same process of

democratization through the influence of town meetings which had earlier occurred in Massachusetts was being echoed and re-echoed in New Hampshire. As long as the Wentworths had been able to control the insular seacoast communities with promises of economic reward and political patronage they had insured the continuity of their power, but by 1765 their ability to do this was in serious jeopardy.

*As the Union Jack is hauled down, British Captain Cochran surrenders his sword and the fort to the raiders. John Langdon was known to have been in control of the men on the first raid and it is probably he who accepted the sword.*



*After the raid, the men carried the powder to the Piscataqua River and placed it on gundalows to be transported up stream to Portsmouth and inland communities.*

During the same period, while their political control at home was beginning to skid, their future power at the court at Whitehall hung in precarious balance joined with the fortunes of their friend and patron, the Duke of Rockingham. In July, 1765 Rockingham was appointed head of the ministry, which bode well for the Wentworths, but he remained in power a scant thirteen months. With his resignation his political fortunes went into a rapid decline. By 1770 Rockingham and Trecothick, the Wentworth agent in London, could not even control appointments to the governor's council in New Hampshire.

The downward spiral of Wentworth political fortunes was unfortunately occurring at the very time when England was forced by circumstance to reform its colonial policies in a desperate search of revenue to sustain both the empire and the enormous debt engendered by Continental and Inter-Colonial wars. The half century of conflict was over, but the costs were still to be paid. Taxing the colonists for their share of the defense burdens seemed to the Crown a just and amicable means of dealing with the ever-increasing costs of world power.

The colonists, on the contrary, viewed these attempts by the Crown and its representatives in reasserting royal prerogative and economic con-

trol as direct threats to the precious "rights of Englishmen" as they had always discerned them. They feared the loss of these "rights" which had been slowly reclaimed by them throughout the eighteenth century. Fuel was added to the fires of general suspicion each time the Crown or its agents (in the persons of royal Governors or other appointees) attempted to assert or reassert the rights of the King. In effect, the New Hampshire colonists began to view the incursions of royal power as a growing conspiracy to deprive them of what had come to be seen as a natural order of governmental balance. This "new" system would be discerned as a direct attack upon the very fount of their English liberties.

These growing fears were coupled with immeasurable petty and parochial grievances such as inflation, the land grant policies of the Wentworth administration, lack of true representation from the newer towns, an unstable currency, increasing surveillance of vessels and a general tightening up of Navigation Act enforcement, unfair economic competition, and the distinct Anglican aura which surrounded the Wentworths. All would eventually

alienate a majority of the New Hampshire colonists, initiating a period of bloodless but revolutionary transition from royal to popular government.

The year 1765 was unique. On March 27, Great Britain passed the Stamp Act. Its fifty-five articles placed taxes varying from three pence to six pounds on all legal and mercantile papers. The general uproar which greeted it is well known. In New Hampshire, little, if any, of the sixty thousand pounds that Parliament had hoped to gain from the act was realized. Instead of creating a new and dependable source of revenue, it created a colony-wide revolt, alienating newspapermen, lawyers and intellectuals. It spawned a general congress which met in New York City in October, 1765.

Both Governor Wentworth and the Provincial Assembly assumed non-committal postures. New Hampshire sent no representatives to the Congress. The overall attitude of Portsmouth's inhabitants, however, could hardly be described as blasé. Throughout the warm summer months of 1765, public resentment grew increasingly more vehement. Sons of Liberty became synonymous



with freedom, and "Liberty" Squares, Bridges, Halls and Hills were dedicated as hallowed symbols of a "new" New Hampshire folklore. A "Liberty Pole" was raised at Puddle Dock near the new "Liberty Bridge." Poetic liberty ran rampant through the town.

In the midst of the excitement over the Stamp Act, particularly the provision calling for non-jury trials by Admiralty courts, news was received that a fellow Portsmouthian, George Meserve, had been commissioned in London as an agent for New Hampshire stamps. Upon reaching Boston on September 9, George was advised of the ill feeling of the townspeople, and summarily resigned before stepping ashore. In the meantime, the people of Portsmouth, aware of his arrival but not his resignation, had convened a mock court to try poor Meserve in effigy. The hapless dummy had supposedly accepted a promise of reward for depriving both his mother and sister. In spite of a plea of — Not Guilty — "he" was sentenced to be hanged *and* burned. On the 12th the depraved symbol could still be seen dangling from a pole in the Haymarket. Lord Bute and the Devil had also gotten into the act, and their effigies hung beside George's. That night the effigies were carried through the town and burned. It was a clear message to would-be stamp agents!

When George, in time, arrived in Portsmouth, he was surrounded by a large but orderly crowd at the Parade. He once again publicly resigned his commission, at which time the same crowd which had earlier burned his effigy gave him three rousing cheers.

The "cursed" act was supposed to go into effect on November 1, 1765. On the preceeding day, *The New Hampshire Gazette*, a sure loser if the act were enforced, appeared with a black border and the editorial statement that it was going to die. The next day "... bells tolled and a funeral procession was made by the Goddess of Liberty: but on depositing her in the grave, some signs of life were supposed to be discovered and she was carried off in triumph."

Governor Wentworth was notably silent during the demonstrations. As he hadn't been sent a copy of the Act he was no doubt unaware of the specifics. There had, moreover, been neither riots nor violence. Courts of law continued to operate, customs houses were kept open, newspapers



*This engraving, originally captioned, "Bringing the powder to Bunker Hill," follows an old but erroneous tradition which says that the powder from the fort was hidden away, then hauled directly to Bunker Hill to be used against the British at that battle. Actually, the powder was portioned out to a number of towns in southeastern New Hampshire. Most of the powder probably did go to Bunker Hill but it went in the powder horns of the individual men or by the keg with small groups of men.*

were published and delivered, and marriage licenses were issued. None bore the hated stamps.

On the evening of November 5, "Gunpowder Day," a guard was alerted at Portsmouth. There is virtually no evidence, however, to support the premise that this signalled the beginning of American independence. Neither personal correspondence nor state papers suggest any hint of open disloyalty to the Crown throughout the Stamp Act crisis in New Hampshire. The people seem merely to have been expressing their anxieties as Englishmen had traditionally done; in the press, in pamphlets and by open assembly.

By early November, the resolves of the New York Stamp Congress had been received. They declared devotion to the King, but clearly stated that "... no taxes be imposed on them but with their own consent or by their representatives." Members of the New Hampshire Assembly were unanimous in their decision to "... fully approve and heartily join in the resolves ..." Additional resolves and petitions were written and forwarded to the King via Barlow Trecothick and John Wentworth, Benning's nephew.

By mid April of the following year rumors of the Act's repeal had sifted to

the hinterland of New Hampshire. Confirmation of what had been strongly suspected arrived on May 16, and on the 19th Exeter declared a celebration. Not to be outdone, Portsmouth began ringing its bells at dawn on the 22nd. Guns saluted the rising sun, banners and decorations were flung out of windows and balconies, toasts were drunk to Pitt, the King and the Governor, and at dusk bonfires were lighted, fireworks kindled, and a general celebration rocked the city. All in all, it was a grand day of "decorum, sobriety and mirth."

Although Parliament had repealed the Stamp Act, it had simultaneously passed the Declaratory Act which stated that it had the authority to make laws for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever." The repeal, then, had postponed but briefly the inevitable clash of political wills. Moreover, a circular letter was forwarded to the Royal Governors requesting that "... those persons who had suffered any injury, or damage in consequence of their assisting to execute the late act ought to be compensated." Meserve, the constant opportunist, promptly filed a claim which was hastily dismissed.

When the New Hampshire Assembly reconvened in November,

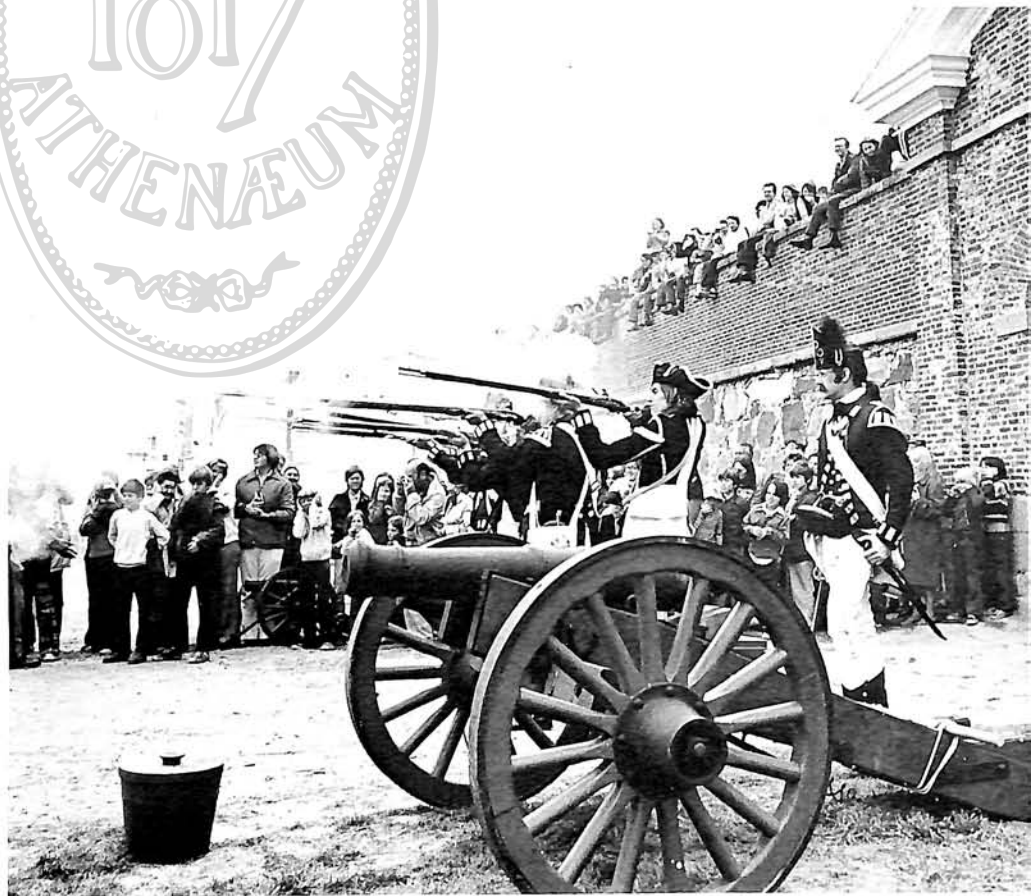


*On October 13, 1974, the official celebration of the 200th anniversary of the raids on Fort William and Mary was held in New Castle under the sponsorship of the Fort William and Mary Committee of the New Hampshire American Revolution Bicentennial Commission. The highlight of the day was a reenactment of the raid of December 14, 1774. On the following pages are photographs by Peter E. Randall of the key moments of the mock battle. In the photograph above, British Captain Cochran warns the gathered militiamen to disperse from the vicinity of the fort.*

1766, Benning Wentworth announced that the King had appointed his nephew, John Wentworth, as royal governor. What he failed to mention was that he himself had been charged with neglecting correspondence, extralegal land grants, passing acts without a suspending clause, and wasting the King's timber. No doubt he was guilty as charged. In addition, he was old, gouty and corpulent. His nephew, by contrast, was respectable, lenient, healthy and was to prove one of the most sympathetic royal governors in the colonies.

The next crisis to be precipitated was the passage of the Revenue Act of 1767 (the first of the Townsend Acts), which placed duties on glass, lead, tea, silk, paper and paints. This series of acts produced irritation throughout the majority of the colonies, but seemed to cause little consternation in Portsmouth. Possibly, the nature of the goods which passed through the town (mostly raw materials) made taxes on fine goods seem irrelevant. Nevertheless, a redress of grievances was drawn up for conveyance to the King. Nicholas Gilman, the messenger, simply kept the letter at his home in Exeter.

Two years later, however, the peo-



*When the revolutionaries continued to threaten the soldiers, then approached the fort, the small force of British troops opened fire.*





*Returning the British fire, the Americans rushed the gate and the British retreated inside.*



*Inside the fort, the British retreated, then held*

ple of Exeter created a committee to inquire into the reasons why the petition had not thus far been dispatched. As a result, the petition was sent off in April, 1770. Shortly thereafter, the Portsmouth Town Meeting (perhaps influenced by propaganda about the Boston Massacre of March 5) did an about-face and decided to accept non-importation. The *Gazette*, in typical form, ran an issue with a black border, coffins and skull and crossbones. "O 'Americans,' This Blood calls Loud for Vengeance!" Parliament repealed the acts on March 5. Portsmouth merchants resumed trade and opposition to royal authority virtually ceased.

The polarization of political fervor into Patriot-Tory factions did not seem to have occurred during the interim period between the repeal of the Townsend Acts (1770) and the passage of the Tea Act (1773). Clashes between the governor and the Assembly were confined to the matters of taxes, land, highways, judges, and the development of counties.

The relative calm of the period did not prevent John Wentworth from trying to consolidate his position in the seacoast area, though. In Exeter, for example, he created a crack corps of cadets, and appointed local notable Peter Gilman to the Governor's Council. John Phillips, founder of Phillips' Academy, and Nicholas Gilman, both influential politicians, were conspicuously wooed.

He also made overt attempts at conciliating his opposition in Portsmouth, but without much success. John Sherbourne and Samuel Cutts had emerged as significant opposition leaders, and both had financial as well as political grievances against the Wentworths. Cutts, especially, had been alienated when his ship, the *Resolution* had been seized by the Crown. Even though the Sons of Liberty had unloaded the cargo, Cutts had lost his ship.

The governor also alienated Assembly leaders by his flirtation with Anglican Dartmouth College. His leadership role in the Church of England did not endear him to the pulpits of either the South or North Congregational Churches. The Sons of Liberty, which by 1773 had been organized into a fairly effective revolutionary group, also formed one of the blocks of opposition facing the governor's mansion. In addition, the *New Hampshire Gazette* was edited by a man with a flair for the sensational. The governor, then faced opposition from the merchants, the clergy, the Sons of Liberty, and the press. It is no mean understatement to conclude that the calm was only on the surface!

The burning of the revenue cutter, *Gaspee*, by a group of Providence merchants also had the effect of accelerating the process of political polarization in New Hampshire. Lord North's ministry appointed a commission to investigate the incident, and

empowered it to have local magistrates arrest the individuals involved. Commissioners were also permitted the use of naval force should local constables refuse to do their duty. Tactics such as these struck down the concepts which many colonial Americans had of their rights under English law.

A Committee of Correspondence was formed in Virginia which circulated copies of its resolutions to all provincial assemblies. Perhaps in response to the actions of her sister provinces, the first New Hampshire Committee of Correspondence was born on May 28, 1773. Since the New Hampshire Assembly adjourned on May 29, the first Committee had a very short life. Nevertheless, the straws which were to break the back of royal control in America were piling up at an alarming rate. Earlier in May of 1773, Parliament, in its attempt to salvage the wreckage of the British East India Company, had passed the Tea Act. From then on, events proceeded rapidly, culminating in the Boston Tea Party of December 16, 1773.

In Portsmouth, the first cargo of tea consisting of twenty-seven chests, was landed without incident and locked in the customs house. A special town meeting was called which requested that the tea be re-shipped to Halifax. This was done. Governor Wentworth, unsure of the temper of the community, kept officers and magistrates on alert to suppress possible violence.



a position and again fired on the Americans.



The revolutionaries rushed the British again and the latter retreated to the flag and were surrounded.

A second cargo of thirty-one chests consigned for a Mr. Perry, who had also ordered the first shipment, was also rerouted to Halifax. Perry felt the ire of the revolutionary spirit. The windows of his house were smashed by a mob.

Peddlers were dispatched throughout the towns of northern New England to hawk both the tea and the acceptance of its reduced price as an economic benefit. In Kingston, a peddler named Graham arrived in the spring of 1774, and began dispensing private samples to the ladies. The men became aware of this, surrounded the tavern and put the "samples" to the torch. Graham was forced to watch his economic security go up in smoke amid huzzahs for "liberty and no taxes," but was otherwise unharmed. Another "Liberty Tree" had been dedicated.

On March 25, 1774 Parliament passed the Boston Port Bill which closed that harbor to all shipping until the destroyed tea was paid for, and until the Crown saw evidence of general remorse. Parliament, in this manner, assumed an impossible and intractable posture which was eventually to spell disaster for Britain's relations with their North American colonies.

By May 19, 1774 news of the closure had reached New Hampshire and the Committee of Correspondence dispatched a revealing note to its Boston counterpart. "... we think the late act of Parliament to shut up the

port of Boston of the most extraordinary nature and fatal tendency . . . and shall ever view your interests as our own." Boston's plight had by then become public knowledge.

It is revealing that of the thirty-four New Hampshire Assemblymen returning to the House in 1774, twelve were new members, representing the largest turnover in personnel since 1755. The Assembly now experienced a considerable drift toward the Patriot side of most issues. Since most of the members who had failed to be reelected were staunchly conservative, it might be assumed that the electorate had adopted a more radical posture.

The governor was aware of this radical shift and early attempted to man Portsmouth's only military post, Fort William and Mary situated in New Castle. On May 26, 1774 the Assembly voted two hundred pounds, to be paid quarterly, for the maintenance of the garrison. His Excellency felt the sum insufficient, but an officer and three men were appointed to administer the fort. Hardly a formidable army with which to stave off revolution!

On May 28, the Assembly voted to establish a second Committee of Correspondence. The vote was 16-15, showing the still delicate balance between the two poles of political opinion, but the success of the motion bears witness to the increasingly radical posture of the House. Governor Wentworth immediately em-

barked upon a series of short adjournments, apparently in hopes that these intervals would be "sobering up" times and promote a repeal of the vote. He dissolved the Assembly altogether on June 8, 1774 after learning that the Speaker had received letters announcing a General Congress. The Committee members were not dissuaded. On July 6 a number of them held a meeting in the Assembly chamber. His Excellency, accompanied by the Rockingham County Sheriff, invaded the room and read an order officially disbanding the illegal meeting. The members pragmatically adjourned to a nearby tavern and began making plans for a Provincial Congress to meet at Exeter on July 21. The purpose was to elect delegates to the Continental Congress!

In due course, the meeting, so carefully prepared for in a Portsmouth tavern *was* held at Exeter, Nathaniel Folsom and John Sullivan were selected to go to Philadelphia, and a resolution was passed which recommended that the towns represented, "... take into consideration the disturbed, unhappy conditions of the town of Boston and liberally contribute toward the relief of the poor of that town." Fortunately for the poor of Boston, they did not have to rely entirely on New Hampshire's aid to sustain them through the crisis. They received two hundred pounds from Portsmouth, one hundred pounds from Exeter,





*The reenactment had its lighter moments unlike the somber attitudes which probably prevailed at the actual raid. No injuries were reported at either the original or the mock battle.*



*With cheers from the militia and spectators alike, the Union Jack was lowered.*

dried peas from Concord and about one hundred sheep from Kingston. With the sheep went a revealing message, however. It stated that, "... unless there is a speedy alteration of the measures, a total disaffection will soon take place, and Britain, instead of being our friend, will be looked upon as an enemy, and then a final separation in all respects will no doubt soon follow." It is reasonable to consider that the meeting at Exeter marked the beginnings, however small, of true representative government in New Hampshire. One might say, in fact, that here was proof that the government of the Province was in the process of peaceful transfer from the Crown to the Patriots.

It must not be overlooked that all

during this time news of additional parliamentary acts was reaching the general public through the medium of the *New Hampshire Gazette* which faithfully and dramatically reported the passage of the Massachusetts Government Act, the Quartering Act and the Quebec Act. News of the Port and Quartering Acts caused great disquiet in the seacoast area and the Quebec Act was greeted with a variety of retorts from local leaders. John Sullivan of Durham cursed Catholicism and the Reverend Jeremy Belknap referred to the Church of Rome as "... the mother of harlots and abominations."

Despite these events, the relatively peaceful politics of the Second Committee of Correspondence continued

into the autumn of 1774. At that time, however, Governor Wentworth provoked an incident which liberated all the pent-up hostilities of the seacoast towns. General Gage requested fifteen carpenters to be sent to Boston, and Wentworth dutifully complied, acting through Nicholas Austin of Middleton. This caused him to be branded "an enemy of the community" by the Second Committee. They also forced Austin to confess on his knees and promise henceforth not to act contrary to the "Constitution of the Country."

Wentworth, labeled a traitor, lost much of whatever support remained in the community through this incident. The peaceful autumn of 1774 deteriorated into a violent winter and

the governor was powerless to prevent it. In December a message was received that the King had imposed an embargo on the export of arms and ammunition to the colonies. As a result, the legislature of Rhode Island had already authorized the "liberation" of powder and shot from the royal garrison at Providence. There was also a rumor in the air that troops and ships were on the way from Boston to ensure that a similar "liberation" did not occur in Portsmouth.

The way seemed apallingly clear. It was the last straw. On the afternoon of December 13, 1774 Paul Revere galloped up the Old Boston Post Road into the city of Portsmouth bringing news of both the embargo and suspected British troop movements.

On the 14th it became clear that the pent up emotions of more than a decade would be released in violence and that the target was to be the small Crown fort of William and Mary at New Castle. A few minutes before noon on that day, his beats slightly muffled by snow which had begun to fall, a drummer boy walked the streets of the city sounding a call to arms. Before long, an entourage of about two hundred men and boys had been assembled.

At the fort, guarding the King's powder were the defenders — a captain named Cochran, five privates and two conscripts. At about one o'clock this "army" received word that a large group of angry citizens was on the way from the center of town. Along the way, moreover, the mob increased strength as citizens from Rye and New Castle hastened to "join up." In all, by the time it reached the fort, the attacking band had more than 400 members. At approximately three o'clock, led by Thomas Pickering and John Langdon, the Patriots mounted their attack on His Majesty's defenses.

Shouts and gunfire were exchanged in the "battle" for William and Mary, but not a single wound was inflicted, save perhaps to Cochran's pride as he was forced to surrender the fort. Lacking keys, which Cochran stubbornly refused to surrender, the door to the powder magazine was broken down and the King's colors were lowered. Three huzzahs were shouted by the conquerors, and by evening ninety-seven barrels of powder had been loaded onto boats for shipment to Exeter and Durham.

Governor Wentworth, caught in an impossible situation, hastily requested



*The raid was completed with the raising of the thirteen star American flag, again to the cheers of some 2,000 spectators.*

ships and troops from Boston. Obviously, he needed all the help he could get, for the next morning men from the surrounding countryside began pouring into the city, led by John Sullivan of Durham recently returned from the Continental Congress. Sullivan and his men surrounded the State House and demanded information about possible reinforcements on the way from Boston. "None were expected" retorted the governor. The mob dispersed, only to reassemble later that evening to remove the remaining military stores from the fort, perhaps for "good measure." Again the

trophies were loaded at the river to be dispersed to other towns.

The powder was soon distributed. Kingston received 12 barrels, Epping 8, Poplin (Fremont) 4, Nottingham 8, Brentwood 6, and Londonderry 1. Remaining stores were distributed in Durham which received 25 barrels, Exeter which got 29. Four barrels remained in Portsmouth. The precious dust was destined for the powder flasks and horns of the local militia, the building blocks of the ancient continental army. The powder and the power belonged no longer to the King, but to the People. In New Hampshire, at least, the Revolution had begun.