

Bringing the Stamp Act Riots into the Classroom

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“Has anyone ever taken part in a riot?” I ask my senior class on the American Revolution. The power of silence: neither I nor they intend to confound each other as we quietly ponder the circumstances in which we might take to the streets, and consider on which side of the barricades we might be found. The class room is not a confessional, I enjoin, prefacing our discussion of the Boston Stamp Act riots of August 1765. We do not need to agree or disagree about the utility and morality of violence, rather strive to understand why people riot and demonstrate, and make sense of such activities across a wide spectrum of behavior driven by antagonisms of ideology, class, race, identity, and power. So, on which side would I find you in 1765, I ask? “The Bostonians’!” Asking students to imagine how they might react in a real –life situation, is only a starting point for understanding historical predicaments, and vice versa of course.

Personal experience is not a prerequisite for making sense of crowd action any more than it is for historicizing social movements. Yet, in according primacy to process over actors historical sociology cannot convey the emotional intensity wrought from participation or close observation, where, with judgments clouded, perceptions of the other become dangerously distorted by individual acts of violence. The sharing of personal crowd experiences—from protest marches to sporting events—helps to inculcate awareness of the dynamics of crowds, while media-sourced scenes of current protest are easily called to mind

or summoned on screen. Thereon, my first task is to establish a theoretical spectrum of crowd action (drawing upon Hobsbawm, Thompson, Tilly, and the Kerner Report of 1968). The students' first task is to review by discussion the taxonomy and typology of riots, drawing upon the rich historiography of eighteenth-century crowd action sampled in their preparatory reading (Maier, Countryman, Hoerder, Nash). Our collective aim, I opine, is to evaluate the nature of Boston's Stamp Act riots of 14 and 26 August 1765 from primary sources: what follows, in terms of lesson planning, problematizes the investigation for two to three hours of class time.

First, artistic representations of crowd action are invariably unforgiving in depicting crowd psychology or casing crowds as ugly instruments of iconoclasm. No less hostile than others Drummond's little-known depiction (1855) of the Porteous riot in Edinburgh of 1736, entices the viewer into the lives of bystanders caught in a human morass, while mobs in the distance lynch the eponymous captain of the city guard. Its subject matter has some currency for the class topic. For crown officers in Massachusetts responsible for pursuing rioters before the American Revolution, the Porteous Riot was the most notorious instance of crowd action, partly on account of Porteous's grisly fate, but also because of the government's botched attempt to establish corporate liability and punish (by means of a hefty fine) the city of Edinburgh for failing to preserve law and order. A similar fate might have befallen Bostonians in 1765-66, when corporate liability was voiced in British government circles, or following the riot of 5 March 1770, memorialized as a Massacre by Revere.

The Boston Stamp Act riots, however, largely escaped instant propagandizing largely because of contemporaries' unease at the violence exhibited in the second of riot. It took about three years before Boston's radicals and moderates publicly celebrated the first riot as an essential prerequisite in their successful campaign to repeal the Stamp tax, by which time they were confident in being able to harness and direct crown action. Even so, Bostonians

were never comfortable in commemorating Stamp Act riots, as Alfred Young has revealed; while there no trials, no soldiers, no deaths, no punishments, memorials were few and short-lived and to nineteenth-century historians embarrassing reminders of social conflict. Our witness testimony is buried in historical accounts where the observational quality is uncertain or singularly skewed. But it is to these sources that the class—and historians—must turn.

Second, the documentation is taken largely from the second volume of the *Papers of Governor Francis Bernard* and the first volume of the *Correspondence of Thomas Hutchinson*. As the editor of the first project and an advisor to the second, I am able to bring to the classroom a deep understanding of particular research resources. The class, moreover, by this stage in the curriculum, is well-prepared to interrogate the materials, having spent twelve hours in class examining topics on theory, historiography, imperial contests, the Stamp Act Crisis of 1764-66 and selected documents. Concentration on the Stamp Act riots aids deeper appreciation of “neo-progressive” models which link aspirant radicalism to social conflict.

Third, I use a series of Powerpoint slides containing marked-up images of a detailed contemporary [map of Boston](#) to trace the progress through the streets of the first riot of Wednesday 14 August. Starting at the great elm at the junction of Orange and Essex streets, where that morning Stamp Distributor Andrew Oliver had been hung in effigy, I lead the audience on a virtual tour to the residence of Governor Francis Bernard, thence to the Town House in King Street (the present-day Old State House very near to the Boston Massacre site), and thence to Oliver's Dock on the waterfront where the mob pulled down a small building where they believed the stamped papers were being kept. That night the mob trashed the garden of Oliver's home, vandalized the exterior and interior of the building, and finished off proceedings with a bonfire on nearby Fort Hill. I do much the same thing when plotting the course of the rioters on Monday 26 August, which culminated in the destruction of the

house of the lieutenant governor and chief justice, Thomas Hutchinson, located in [Garden Court Street](#) (and marked [with a wall plaque](#)). This time I use Google Earth to convey the claustrophobia of the famously crooked streets of Boston's North End, where Hutchinson's fine mansion sat, surrounded by the houses and tenements of Boston's middling and lower sorts.

Fourth, the remainder of the class (some ninety minutes) is devoted to group work in which three to four students examine and discuss documents for both riots (listed below) made available in advance. Some occasional steer is necessary to move analysis forward, clarify phrases, or decipher eighteenth-century print-type, so it is important to be on hand to help. Interrogation of the documents proceeds with specific objectives in mind: Who were the rioters? Who were the organizers? Who were the victims? Who were the observers? Who were the law enforcers? What were the British reactions?

Fifth, let me proffer some commentary on the provenance of the sources. Items selected include the official correspondence of Governor Francis Bernard, which contains (the hitherto unpublished) fullest surviving account of the second Stamp Act riot. Written on 31 August, it was based not on personal observation (for the governor had retreated to Castle William shortly after the first riot) but on information provided by his deputy, Thomas Hutchinson, and others whom Bernard consulted over four or five days.ⁱ The class read this second letter in its entirety (for reasons explained below) along with extracts from Hutchinson's fullest report on his suffering and articles from the *Boston Gazette*, the leading anti-government newspaper in Massachusetts.ⁱⁱ

Sixth: some highlights. The rioters: “Between 30 or 40 of the lowest of the people,” Bernard wrote, engaged in “demolishing” Hutchinson's house on 26 August. Their identities are unknown, though Ebenezer MacIntosh, the recognized leader of the Boston mobs, was arrested on 27 Aug. along with six other rioters; MacIntosh was released within hours, and no

rioter ever stood trial. Bernard's main concern, however, were the organizers and sponsors among the community at large: while historians attribute the organization of the riots to the Loyal Nine, a group of local businessmen and craftsmen who were the precursors of the Sons of Liberty, Bernard further reported that "50 Gentlemen Actors" in disguise joined the mob during the first riot while the "heads of the mob . . . are some of the principal Men." As is already well-known, a central issue of concern for the local Whigs in the aftermath of the riots was how to exert influence and control over crowds. On the whole, they managed to do that for the duration of entire imperial crisis and to use crowd action to mobilize popular support at key moments. The second riot raised the specter of social conflict for them as well as the governor.

It was now becoming a War of plunder, of general levelling & taking away the distinction of rich & poor: so that those Gentlemen who had promoted & approved the cruel treatment of M^r Oliver [in the first riot], became now as fearful for themselves as the most loyal person in the Town could be: they found, as I told some of them, that they had raised the Devil & could not lay him again.

The wrecking of Hutchinson's house historians take to be indicative of class-based resentment of Hutchinson's wealth and status, as much as popular dislike of his plural office-holding. As such, it provides one of the few instances, clearly visible, of class antagonism during the Stamp Act Crisis. Hutchinson and other victims were compensated for their losses by the province legislature before the British government and Parliament insisted that all colonies make restitution to victims of riots. However, the Massachusetts Indemnity Act also promised the province rioters immunity from prosecution, and though approved by the governor, was subsequently disallowed by the British Privy Council.

Governor Bernard had no effective means of dispersing crowds. The local magistrates refused to intervene on either occasion; the militia also refused to turn out, and indeed several

of the men reputedly joined the processions. The nearest body of British troops were at New York, and though Bernard considered requesting their assistance in the aftermath of the riots, he wisely desisted lest he provoke more extensive violence and endanger the Customhouse. From the governor's perspective, the king's law was effectively unenforceable. When the act took effect on 1 Nov., the governor refused to direct officials to proceed without using stamped papers and so the law courts and customhouses closed their doors for several months, until it was evident that Parliament was going to repeal the Stamp Act. The Stamp Act was never enforced in Massachusetts, or any other continental colony except Georgia.

Thus far, Bernard's reportage tends to confirm historians' neo-progressive perspectives on colonial politics. But perhaps the most valuable aspects of his account concern the imperial dimension of the crisis. Bernard's letter of 31 August, is singularly the most important letter in the Bernard Papers volume 2. Not just because of its account of the second riot but also (a) for its impact on British policymaking and (b) for establishing a pattern in the governor's official recounting of events in Boston Bernard crafted the letter with the earl of Halifax in mind (unaware that Halifax had demitted office in July). Bernard's anxiety and stress were real, and provide insight into how officials fear a crowd's potential for violence regardless of its actual restraint. In dramatizing events Bernard was angling for a British response that would exculpate himself for the failure of the Stamp Act, raise his stock in London, and assuage the uncomfortable realization that he was a sitting target for the mobs. His messages were most certainly mixed: reform, recall, troops, coercion, and conciliation. Was that deliberate? Probably, for in reporting events he invariably always pushing the idea that resolution could only be achieved by ministerial intervention; his tactic of manufacturing a sense of crisis for his officials ultimately proved successful in persuading British ministers to send troops to Boston in 1768. But in 1765, it probably confounded ministers.

It is likely, though not certain, that the British government first learned of the Boston Stamp Act riots when they received Bernard's account of the second riot, on 5 Oct. His report on the first riot arrived in London two days later. This meant that the British were unable to appreciate how the protests escalated and were probably blinded to the comparative mildness of the first riot by the dazzling drama of Bernard's second letter. Within days the letters were considered by the Board of Trade (the government's main advisory body on colonial affairs), the secretary of state for the Southern Department (in charge of colonial affairs), and the Privy Council (the king's advisory council). Unable to modulate their response, the British were in danger of overreacting and seriously considered sending Regulars to Boston to quell the revolt that some believed had taken place. It was not until 22 Oct. that the Rockingham administration (which had replaced Grenville's ministry the previous July), resolved against taking military action. (Bullion 1992; Nicolson 2012) Governors were left to sort out the mess on their own, and implement the Stamp Act as best they might. It was not until the following February that the administration gave a clear signal of its intent to repeal the act, which Parliament did on 18 Mar.

The two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Stamp Act riots has been and gone. Yet, Bostonians have largely forgotten the twelve days in August 1765 that changed the world of colonial Americans. Instead, we all memorialize the Tea Party of 16 December 1773, a historical turning point in its own right, when Boston strong defied imperial authority. As instances of crowd action, the Stamp Act riots pale in comparison to later violent scenes in France or England, though comparisons must first be made with disturbances in colonial America: including the more violent Stamp Act riots in New York (for which see Nash), the dismantling of royal government in Massachusetts in 1774 and rural risings (notably the land riots in New York, the North Carolina Regulators, and Shays

Rebellion in 1787). Bernard's papers provide nonetheless may help us discover some of the drama—manufactured and reported—that changed the course of history.

Appendix: Documentation on the Stamp Act Riots.

Account of the destruction of the home of Thomas Hutchinson (Hutchinson to Richard Jackson, 30 Aug. 1765.)	(Tyler & Dubrulle 2014: 291-294)
List of goods stolen from Thomas Hutchinson's house on 26 Aug. 1765	(Tyler & Dubrulle 2014: 318-335)
Gov. Francis Bernard, letters on the Stamp Act riots (Bernard to the Board of Trade, Castle William, 15 & 16 Aug. 1765; (Bernard to the earl of Halifax [secretary of state for the Southern Department], Castle William, 31 Aug. 1765)	(Nicolson 2012: 301-307, 337-345) at www.bernardpapers.com
Proclamations on the Stamp Act riots, given by the governor on 15 and 28 Aug. 1765	(Nicolson 2012: 334-336) at www.bernardpapers.com and <i>Boston Gazette</i> , 2 Sept. 1765 at http://www.masshist.org/dorr/
Reports on the Stamp Act Riots in the <i>Boston Gazette</i> , 19 and 26 Aug., 2 Sept. 1765 and 9 Sept. 1765.	http://www.masshist.org/dorr/

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ⁱ Volumes four and five *Bernard Papers* are available as [open access e-books](#); volume 2, from which the governor's letter has been extracted, will appear in digital form in due course, and until then I will make the material available via the project website at www.bernardpapers.com.

ⁱⁱ The *Boston Gazette* reported the first riot in detail, but not the second, preferring instead to fill columns with the governors' proclamations, the resolves of the town meeting, and the proceedings of the Governor and Council. The *Boston Gazette* can be freely accessed at the Harbottle Dorr Collection, hosted by the Massachusetts Historical Society, though not the issue for 9 Sept. 1765.