

SONS OF LIBERTY AND STAMP MEN

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On August 8, 1765, it was made known that Andrew Oliver had been appointed stamp distributor for Massachusetts. On August 14 a motley gathering so intimidated him that he resigned. Thereafter for two months similar groups in other towns visited their stamp officers with the same intent; with the exception of the Georgia distributor all resigned in the face of such determined resentment.

This step, the first and most important in the opposition to the Stamp Act, was the work of those later to style themselves the Sons of Liberty, the characteristic organization of the Stamp Act controversy. The formation, organization, and activities¹ of these Liberty Boys form the subject of this paper.

It is perfectly true that in the first few months of the controversy this group was not formally organized; there was not even agreement on the name, and the term "Sons of Liberty" did not come into common use until November or December.² It is also perfectly true, however, that spontaneous as was the resentment against the act there was at work some directing agency. The crowds themselves belonged to no society; none was needed. The unity of sentiment and the intensity of feeling made at first leadership of only the cruder sort necessary to direct the overflowing energies of the people, aroused as much against the enforcement of the new revenue laws at a time of economic depression and widespread unemployment as against the Stamp Act.

It was the mob captain who first provided leadership. Usually recruited from the lower classes, frequently holding some minor official position in the town government, each leader had under him a compact group of men ready to assemble at his word. In Boston, where conditions were rapidly growing worse, Ebenezer Mackintosh, sealer of leather, had two or three hundred men at his beck and call, and could gather two or three thousand more on a moment's notice.³ Isaac Sears, swaggering ruffian, and the terror of timid

¹ We are concerned here rather with types of activities than with details familiar to students of the period.

² E. g., C. L. Becker, *History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776*, pp. 35, 43.

³ G. P. Anderson, "A Note on Ebenezer Mackintosh," *Publications, Colonial Society Massachusetts*, XXVI, 348-366.

officialdom, together with Joseph Allicocke, the contractor of provisions, held the New York mob in the hollow of his hand. So powerful was "King" Sears that the governor, Sir Henry Moore, once called on him to aid in maintaining the peace of the city.⁴ An "insolent foreigner" of Newport, Samuel Crandall, was admittedly the chief instigator of the riotous proceedings in Providence and Newport during the last week of August; a tavern keeper of Philadelphia, Isaac Howell, made life miserable for the distributor there; and farther south, William Johnson, an influential mechanic, first gathered the group so brilliantly captained by Christopher Gadsden.⁵ Other cities had their mob leaders, but only these few have survived the test of time or the tricks fate plays with historical documents; others may have been more important—their names are gone.

It is perfectly evident that behind these mob captains there was some guiding force. Though all the facts concerning the power behind the crowd leaders in each city are not available, we know enough to outline the general situation. All the evidence points to the general conclusion that behind every mob leader there was a small group of men, keeping their identity secret, who had gotten together before the actual outbreak against the stamp distributors, made their plans for this step, and thereafter charted the course of popular opposition. The Boston group, styling themselves the "Loyal Nine," seems to have been one of the first to organize, laying their plans in the summer of 1765. The Nine were drawn, as was true in large measure of similar groups in other cities, from the middle and lower classes: two distillers, two braziers, a jeweller, a painter, a printer, and two merchants. Few in Boston knew of their work, the credit or blame for the popular disturbances being laid on the broad shoulders of Mackintosh.⁶ In New York a similar group was

⁴ G. D. Scull (ed.) *The Montresor Journals* (Collections of the New York Historical Society, 1881), pp. 340, 368. Hereafter cited as *Montresor Journals*.

⁵ *Boston Gazette*, Sept. 2, 1765; *Rhode Island Records*, VI, 454 ff.; *John Dickinson Papers* (Hist. Soc. Pa.), index under Howell; E. McCrady, *The History of South Carolina under the Royal Government, 1719-1776*, pp. 589 f. Johnson is said to have had private means.

⁶ W. V. Wells, *Samuel Adams*, I, 63, says the group was formed either in the spring of 1765 or at the time of the August riots. The only direct evidence is in the *Massachusetts Gazette*, August 21, 1765, in which the writer states that on the afternoon of August 14 the people entered the home of Andrew Oliver and there formed their society by name the Union Club. This probably refers, however, to the general agreement of all present to stand together in defense of their liberties; the Loyal Nine had no doubt been meeting for some time. The Nine was made up of John Avery, Thomas Chase, John Smith, Stephen Cleverly, George Trott, Thomas Crafts, Benjamin Edes, Henry Bass, and Henry Welles. G. P. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 356; cf. the *Works of John Adams*, II, 178 f. Henry Bass wrote Samuel Savage after the second resignation of Oliver: "We do everything to keep this and the first affair Private; and are not a little pleas'd to hear that McIntosh has the Credit of the whole Affair." *Proceedings, Massachusetts Historical Society*, XLIV, 688 f.

formed about the same time—two or three merchants, a tavern keeper, a cabinet maker, and even a teacher.⁷ There was less interest in Philadelphia, possibly because the heavy hand of economic depression rested lightly on the city, and as a result the stamp distributor, John Hughes, could hold out longer. But in spite of popular lethargy there was nevertheless a small group associated for the same purpose as those in New York and Boston. Charles Thomson, Scotch-Irish merchant, William Bradford, printer, and Robert Morris did their best to force the resignation of Hughes, and after finally accomplishing this did what they could to keep alive the flame.⁸ Samuel Chase and William Paca, later referred to as two of the most important committeemen in the colonies, took charge of the work of the Liberty Boys in Annapolis and Baltimore.⁹

The formation of similar groups in other cities is more obscure. It is obvious that they must have existed and in some instances we can surmise the membership, but there is little to connect some of the familiar revolutionary figures with the Sons of Liberty. Cornelius Harnett, John Ashe, and Hugh Waddell surely led the Wilmington crowds; no less surely was Christopher Gadsden the directing genius behind William Johnson.¹⁰ The redoubtable Colonel Israel Putnam, aided by Hugh Laddie, headed the New London and Pomfret Sons of Liberty; William Goddard and a group of Providence merchants had begun to make their plans as early as August, and Dr. Thomas Young was no doubt as efficient in Albany as he was later in Boston.¹¹ We know of the existence of the group in Georgia without knowing its membership, for about the end of October the spirit against the Stamp Act increased, "and those persons who falsely call themselves the Sons of Liberty began to have private cabals and meetings, and . . . many had signed an association to oppose and prevent the distribution of the Stamped papers, and the act from taking effect."¹² Of the groups in other cities we know little or nothing.

⁷ *New York Journal*, May 3, 1770. Hugh Hughes taught an evening school. *New York Journal*, Apr. 30, 1767. Others of the group were Isaac Sears, John Lamb, Joseph Allicocke, Marinus Willett—the Paul Revere of New York—Thomas Robinson and William Wiley.

⁸ A. M. Schlesinger, *Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution*, p. 73.

⁹ Charles Carroll, *Unpublished Letters of Charles Carroll*, pp. 112 f.; *Lamb Papers* (N. Y. Hist. Soc.), p. 19.

¹⁰ *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, X, 98; R. D. W. Connor, *Cornelius Harnett*, p. 33.

¹¹ *New York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy*, Aug. 22, 1765; Joseph Johnson, *Traditions and Reminiscences of the Revolution in the South*, pp. 37-43; *Lamb Papers*, p. 35.

¹² Governor James Wright to Secretary Conway, cited in C. C. Jones, *History of Georgia*, II, 61.

It was with this loose organization that the first five months' work was done. The Liberty Boys as formed in the summer of 1765 comprised small groups of radicals working through mob leaders, whose duty it was to assemble the crowd and carry out plans previously made. There was no technical organization; none was needed.¹³ Evidence of the guiding hands of secretly associated leaders may be found in the first attack on the stamp distributors.

It is not necessary here to recount the trials of these unfortunates; one need only point out the way in which the people were prepared for the actual work of intimidation. The Bostonian was greeted on the morning of August 14 with an effigy swinging from a centrally located tree. No one with goods to sell was allowed to pass until the effigy had gone through the motions of stamping the goods with the "mark of the Beast." At night the figure was cut down and carried in procession. When the crowd came in sight of the stamp office, signal was hardly needed for the attack.¹⁴ In Connecticut, leaders in the more important towns planned popular demonstrations with the effigy of Ingersoll as the principal victim. Norwich burnt in the evening an effigy which had been hanging all day, and in New London a procession, making a prodigious racket with drums, music, and guns, followed the doomed figure to the place of execution, everyone shouting, "There hangs a Traitor, there's an Enemy to his Country!" A mock court in Lebanon for the trial of the stamp master denied all the rights of Englishmen to the prisoner, only his virtual representative being there to plead for him. The Windham Boys suspended him between heaven and earth as fit for neither, while in New Haven the effigy was placed on horseback and ridden through the town, followed by an enthusiastic crowd which pelted him with everything in sight. It is significant that the demonstrations in New London, Lebanon, and Windham occurred on the same day, August 26, and that the others came within a week or so of them.¹⁵ It is no wonder then that as Ingersoll was riding

¹³ The statement in Becker, *Political Parties in New York*, p. 49, "It is a curious fact that the Society whose *raison d'être* is said to have been the nullification of the stamp act was not formally organized until after the stamps had been safely lodged in the town house" is misleading because it disregards the earlier association of the radical leaders.

¹⁴ *Boston Gazette, Supplement*, Aug. 19, 1765. The owner of the tree threatened to cut down the effigy but was warned for the safety of his windows to desist. A Cambridge man gave the trousers for the figure, and many people from neighboring towns were in Boston that day.

¹⁵ This account may be followed in the *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 26, 1765, and the *Connecticut Gazette*, Aug. 30, Sept. 6, 18, 1765.

to Hartford on the twenty-third of September to seek the protection of the governor, he should discover three converging groups from Windham, Norwich, and New London. Connecticut had been thoroughly prepared to receive Jared Ingersoll and his stamps in the most approved American manner.

Almost the same procedure was carried out in Rhode Island. The day before the actual attack on the homes of Martin Howard, Thomas Moffat, and Augustus Johnson, a large number of people in Newport formed a procession with effigies of the three, each with a halter around his neck, from which each was suspended on the public gallows.¹⁶ Next day the plundering began; we can only imagine what the people had been told during the demonstration. The threatening aspect of affairs in New York, together with what was reported there of affairs in Boston, so terrified James McEvers, the stamp officer, that he voluntarily resigned. Articles had already begun to appear in the papers as early as August 22, and had McEvers retained his office there is no reason to suppose that he would not have been treated as were the others.

A few additional illustrations will suffice to show that behind the popular gatherings there was some group which had preconcerted the plans. The stamp master for New Hampshire had not arrived in Portsmouth when his name was published, but all plans had been made to receive him on landing. A demonstration was held with the inevitable effigies of the distributor—George Meserve—the Devil (or Bute?), and Grenville; amid groans and hisses the whole was burnt. The imprecations changed to cheers, however, when Meserve voluntarily resigned as soon as he landed.¹⁷ The stamp officers for the southern colonies were not known or did not come until much later. There were some demonstrations, nevertheless, in preparation for their expected arrival. Dumfries, Virginia, effigied its distributor in September, and in Wilmington, North Carolina, the townspeople were forced to gather around a bonfire and drink toasts to Liberty, Property, and no Stamp Duty.¹⁸ Though the preparation was better in some colonies than in others, and though we can dis-

¹⁶ *Boston Gazette*, Sept. 2, 1765.

¹⁷ *Boston Gazette, Supplement*, Sept. 16, 1765; Nathaniel Adams, *Annals of Portsmouth* (Portsmouth, 1825), p. 216.

¹⁸ *Georgia Gazette*, Oct. 24, 1765; *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, VII, 123 f.

cern it more easily in some cases, yet it may safely be said that everywhere some group was laying its plans and preparing the people for the actual work of intimidation.¹⁹

The activity of the Sons of Liberty did not cease with the resignation of the stamp masters. The spirit of opposition had to be kept up; though there were no officers there were stamps, and the act was to go into force on the first of November. The South eagerly awaited the arrival of the distributors and in the meantime united with their northern brethren in preventing the initial enforcement of the act. Radicals kept in touch with each other, making every effort to bring the doubtful colonies into line. Governor Bull of South Carolina thought that the Charlestonians were disposed to obey the act, but that they were so poisoned with principles propagated from Rhode Island and Boston (whence vessels frequently came) that they determined to seize the stamped papers.²⁰ And Governor Wright was sure that he would have had no trouble in Georgia "but for the inflammatory papers, letters, and messages continually sent to the people here from the Liberty Boys, as they call themselves, in Charlestown, South Carolina, and by whom I am very clear all our disturbances and difficulties have been occasioned."²¹ Nor were the radicals any less active in their own colonies than they were in promoting the spirit elsewhere. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, a popular demonstration was held, but of course some groups were more alert than others to create opportunities. Only the Boston and Philadelphia leaders thought of celebrating the change in ministry, an event which was known in the colonies the second week in September. Notified of this happy omen by the town crier, the people of Boston assembled and with cheers drank in the new ministry, not forgetting the old, for the flag which toasted "PITT the Supporter of Liberty and the Terror of Tyrants" carried on the other side

To B—e and G-n-e, mark the event,
Both Heaven and Earth are Foes,
While Curses on each Wretch are sent
By every Wind that blows.

¹⁹ Much the same thing is apparent in Georgia in spite of the failure there. See *Georgia Gazette*, Nov. 14, 1765, recounting the events of September 27.

²⁰ W. R. Smith, *South Carolina as a Royal Province 1719-1776*, p. 351.

²¹ Quoted in Jones, *History of Georgia*, II, 62.

The Philadelphians, still nursing their distributor along, were even more pointed in their actions; there was a bonfire for the new ministry and an effigy for the old, as represented by the stamp officer. The whooping and hallooing around the house of the "stamper" caused him hastily to bar his windows and doors and load his guns.²²

Very few of the groups, however, failed to appear when it was thought stamps were arriving. With muffled, tolling bells, flags at half-mast, threatening placards, and swinging effigies, they greeted the vessels and forced the storing of the stamps in some safe place.²³

The first of November was the important day in the calendar of the Sons of Liberty. It was then that the most elaborate demonstrations were held, the greatest efforts made to nullify the act. In some cities the printers were warned to continue issuing their weekly sheets lest they incur the just resentment of the people.²⁴ The celebrations on that "pregnant Day, big with the Fate of North America" evince the growing connection among the groups. Portsmouth, Newport, and Wilmington, North Carolina, all carried out practically the same program. American Liberty, aged one hundred and forty-five, was found in a dying condition, and preparations were made for her burial. She died upon November first; the funeral procession wound its doleful way through the streets and at the grave the Sons of Liberty addressed the weeping mourners: "Oh LIBERTY! the Darling of my Soul!—Glorious LIBERTY, admir'd, ador'd by all true Britons!—LIBERTY dead! it cannot be!" But at the moment of interment a groan was heard from the coffin, Liberty had only been in a trance. The rejoicing which naturally followed lasted until late in the night.²⁵ For the greater part, the demonstrations were carried off without actual violence. Governor Bernard felt keenly the insult implied in the celebration, but beyond a large amount of harmless yelling the crowd committed no depredations, though they had taken precautions that no one should inter-

²² *Boston Gazette, Supplement*, Sept. 16, 1765; Thomas Balch, *Letters and Papers Relating Chiefly to the Provincial History of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1855), p. 207.

²³ It is not necessary here to repeat the oft-told story of the reception of the stamps.

²⁴ It was reported in New York that the Boston printers had been told to continue or their office would be torn down. *New York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy*, Oct. 31, 1765. John Holt of New York received a similar warning. *Ibid.* Mr. Stuart of the *North Carolina Gazette* was told that if he stopped he would receive the same treatment as the stamp men. *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, VII, 124.

²⁵ See *Boston Gazette*, Nov. 11, 1765; *Newport Mercury*, Nov. 4, 1765; *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, VII, 124. The affair in Newport was advertised in the *Mercury, Supplement*, October 28, 1765.

fere with their program.²⁶ In New York alone, where the stamps had not yet been dealt with, was there violence of any importance. Elsewhere the day was uniformly observed with effigies, tolling bells, and a great deal of shouting and drinking.

Perfect tranquillity followed the events of November first. "Peace Proclaimed" appeared on placards posted in New York and for some weeks gentlemen's windows and sensibilities were safe. Within a short time, however, Sons of Liberty were concerting new plans for keeping alive the spirit of opposition. Aside from a few scattered demonstrations the activity of the next two months centers about the stamp masters. In some of the southern colonies the distributors had just begun to arrive and as each landed he was met by an excited crowd, which demanded his resignation. In others the arrival of the stamps sent the crowd on a hunt for the unlucky receiver. Mr. Mercer of Virginia faced the people of Williamsburg on October 30; Mr. Houston of North Carolina came on November 16; the South Carolina distributors, George Saxby and Caleb Lloyd, agreed on October 26 to suspend the operation of their office, but in Georgia there was so much uncertainty as to the incumbent, and such energy exhibited by Governor Wright and the merchants, that the radicals obtained little satisfaction. Though John Parnham, acting on behalf of George Angus not yet arrived, agreed to suspend exercising the duties of the office, when Angus himself came in January he was protected by the governor and some stamps were used.²⁷ In the North, though the distributors had already resigned their offices in August and September, they were not to be left in peace, but once more were to serve the ends of the Liberty Boys.

²⁶ On the effigy of Grenville was a placard bearing a poem, one verse of which follows:

Take heed my Brother Rogues, take heed,
In me your honest Portion read:
Dear Cousin PETER no Excuse,
Come down with me without your Shoes;
'Tis G——le calls, and sink or swim,
You'd go to H—L to follow him.

Boston Gazette, Nov. 4, 1765. Governor Bernard's comments may be found conveniently in J. G. Palfrey, *History of New England*, V. 339 note. He had wanted a night watch, but the colonel of the regiment said he could get no drummer to call the troops, for the one who had tried it had had his drum broken.

²⁷ Accounts may be conveniently found in H. J. Eckenrode, *The Revolution in Virginia*, pp. 25 f.; McCrady, *South Carolina under the Royal Government 1719-1776*, pp. 570 f.; *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, VII, 123-125; Jones, *History of Georgia*, II, 64. William Houston seems to have been the only one of the southern distributors called upon a second time. On April 15 he was required to resign his commission and papers to Mayor De Rosset of Wilmington. *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, VII, 198.

Their activities in this connection show both alertness on the part of the local groups and an increasing degree of correlation among them. The Philadelphia radicals had had some difficulty with their distributor but had finally obtained a statement from him. Defection was feared, however, and from the uncertain accounts we have, it seems that the New York committee decided to lend its aid. John Lamb went to Philadelphia and with his help Hughes was once again forced to resign.²⁸ The New York Sons of Liberty were also active in the case of the Maryland stamp officer, Zachariah Hood. He had fled to New York after the refusal of the governor of Maryland to accept his resignation, but on November 28 he found himself in the hands of a group of New York Liberty Boys, who lost no time in obtaining complete satisfaction from him.²⁹ When the news of this was heard in Maryland, there was great rejoicing. The Lads of Frederick gathered around the dead body of the Stamp Act, and with many inscriptions and insulting epithets proceeded to the grave, where the only mourner was the effigy of Hood; at the close of the rites, he too fell dead—from grief no doubt—and was buried with his mistress.³⁰ After looking to the concerns of their neighbors, the New Yorkers turned to their own stamp master, who had foiled them by his voluntary resignation in August. They were not to be denied the pleasure of a personal visitation, however, and on December 2, James McEvers was forced to take the usual oath.³¹ Mr. Coxe of New Jersey was called upon by the Liberty Boys of Woodbridge the last of December, and to them he tendered his second resignation.³²

An even greater degree of correlation and of local preparation is seen in the case of New England. It was industriously rumored throughout Massachusetts that Andrew Oliver had taken up his commission and might execute it. The Loyal Nine—authors of the rumor?—immediately determined upon a second oath from him,

²⁸ See Isaac Q. Leake, *John Lamb*, p. 19, and more especially a letter of Joseph Allicocke, probably to Lamb, inclosing some packets with the following instructions: "look at the inclosed & Seal, and distribute them with speed, privacy, and usual Secrecy, let Hughes's be first delivered, drop one of the others the Evening following at the Coffee Ho. and do what you like with the Third." *Lamb Papers*, p. 5.

²⁹ *New York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy*, Dec. 5, 1765.

³⁰ *Maryland Gazette* (Green), Dec. 10, 1765.

³¹ *New York Mercury*, Dec. 9, 1765. A week before, Peter de Lancey, the inspector appointed for Canada and Nova Scotia, had been forced to resign. *New York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy*, Nov. 28, 1765.

³² *Ibid.*, Jan. 9, 1766.

adjudging the first inconclusive. Under the most humiliating circumstances, on December 17, Andrew Oliver stood before the Sons of Liberty and solemnly swore never to execute the act. A broadside spread the glad news to the neighboring towns.³³ In Rhode Island as early as October there was a suggestion that Augustus Johnson still contemplated exercising the duties of his office, and a two-column diatribe in the *Newport Mercury* scored the perfidious stamp master who would resign his office and then call for stamps,³⁴ but it was not until December that actual steps against him were taken. On the twenty-fourth the Sons of Liberty waited upon him, but found the bird flown to that sanctuary of all government officials, one of His Majesty's men-of-war. Governor Ward then called upon him for a categorical statement, but on receiving no reply, the people took matters into their hands. The sheriff was sent aboard the ship, and he brought Johnson ashore into the waiting arms of the Liberty Boys. In their presence he damned the Stamp Act to all eternity—in perfect sincerity, we have no doubt. A few days later a curious piece was posted, declaring:

That no Son of Perdition among us . . . shall ever mention that detestable Pamphlet called a *Stamp Act*, with Applause, nor in any Way, by Word or Writing, Sign or Token, ever aid or assist in the Prosecution of the Contents thereof, without our highest Indignation. . . .³⁵

From Rhode Island the flame spread to Connecticut. Jared Ingersoll had been under surveillance ever since his first resignation and some letters of his to officials in England had fallen into the hands of the Liberty Boys. A deputation was sent to him, and though he assured it of the honesty of his intentions and the harmless nature of his correspondence, no statement of his would satisfy the people, and in several places the letters were publicly read. The

³³ See the *Works of John Adams*, II, 156. The broadside may be found in the broadside collection of the Mass. Hist. Soc., under the date of Dec. 18, 1765. The day before Oliver was visited the following notice appeared in the *Boston Gazette*: "ALL the Distributors & Inspectors of the Stamps throughout *N. America*, have in the most public and solemn Manner, resigned their detestable Employment, except only the Hon. *Andrew Oliver*, esq. . . . who since the first instant has taken up his Commission.—Whether he intends to act under it or not, is uncertain? He only can resolve the question." The italics have been reversed.

³⁴ *Supplement*, Oct. 28, 1765. It is violently, even indecently, written.

³⁵ See *Rhode Island Records*, VI, 478; *Newport Mercury*, Dec. 30, 1765; *Boston Gazette*, Jan. 6, 1766. The piece was signed "by Order of the Right Worshipful Grand-Master, and the Wardens and Stewards of our Lodge, by four enter'd 'Prentices, E.O.A.Z." *Newport Mercury*, Jan. 6, 1766.

Sons of Liberty in Pomfret, after passing severe strictures on him, even urged that his letters be read in every county, offering to distribute copies to any desiring them.³⁶ Ingersoll, having had one experience with an irate crowd, had no wish for another, and on receipt of two anonymous letters calling on him for a statement of his intentions, he declared on oath that he would never execute the act, which he deemed an infringement of the liberties of colony and people. But even this did not appease the Sons of Liberty, and for some months thereafter his letters were still read at certain of the meetings.³⁷

George Meserve was the last to feel the weight of popular resentment. As a preliminary to waiting on him, the Liberty Boys on January 3 assembled in parade with effigies of Grenville and Meserve, both in the chains of slavery. A committee of the leading inhabitants of Portsmouth was then sent to him, and to it he gave his official resignation, together with his commission and instructions, which were carried about the town on a sword.³⁸

All the work of the Sons of Liberty up to this point had been done with the loose organization described above. The uprising against the stamp men and the events of the fall of 1765 had been the result of a general indignation against the Stamp Act and had required very little organization. But with the stamps stored and the first of November safely passed, the wave of enthusiasm began to die down. The violence of the radicals, and the desire of many to await the outcome of the petition of the Stamp Act Congress to the King, caused a gradual turning against the Liberty Boys, who felt their influence declining.³⁹ Even among the ranks of those who had supported the first disturbances divisions appeared, and

³⁶ *Boston Gazette*, Jan. 13, 1766. See also New Haven Historical Society, *Papers*, IX, 362, 366.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 369 f. As late as March 1 they were still being read, and attempts were made to prevent his corresponding with English friends. *Ibid.*, p. 381. Even to write to Ingersoll was dangerous. Joseph Chew of New London wrote him: "will you believe me I am now become the attention of the Sons of Liberty who are desired by some of their western friends Closely to watch & observe my Actions and motions, for that I carry on a very traterous & wicked Correspondance with you." *Ibid.*, p. 377.

³⁸ *New Hampshire Gazette*, Jan. 10, 1766.

³⁹ E. g., *Montresor Journals*, p. 348; "Meetings of the Libertines who seem to decline, being much concerned that the Gentlemen of Fortune in the town dont publicly join them." This is most curiously corrupted in C. H. Van Tyne, *Causes of the War of Independence*, p. 171, to imply that they preferred that gentlemen did not join them.

there are constant references to the "True-Born Sons of Liberty" as distinct from the "Sons of License."⁴⁰

Hence it was that the Sons of Liberty felt the need for reviving their influence and strengthening their position. They saw that they must gain the support of the better classes, and that closer contact of the local groups was essential.

The Boston Loyal Nine, by this time the Sons of Liberty, made the first attempt to interest the more important political leaders. John Adams was invited to attend one of the meetings; the committee was careful, we may be sure, that he heard nothing to shock him. Later his advice was requested on various important projects, and he was even asked to write inscriptions for some of their placards and transparencies.⁴¹ The Portsmouth Boys after openly forming their society obtained the services of Dr. Samuel Langdon as their corresponding secretary, and the Newport Sons of Liberty gained the consent of Henry Ward, Metcalfe Bowler, and William Ellery to serve on their general committee.⁴²

New York had already made contact with at least two members of the Council—John Morin Scott and William Smith—and the New York committee was the first to see the need for an intercolonial organization which would harmonize the activities of the Sons of Liberty and promote a firm union of them all. The leaders first sounded out other groups, sending agents late in December into New England to propose an association of the Sons of Liberty. This association involved on the part of its members the necessity of marching to the defense of any in danger of the Stamp Act, of watching vigilantly all those most likely to introduce the use of stamps, and of defending all who would agree not to enforce the act. All were to unite in promoting a strong union of the colonies.⁴³ On December 31 two of the agents arrived in New London and entered into conference with the leaders of the Liberty Boys there,

⁴⁰ For example, the broadside recounting the resignation of Oliver on December 17 speaks of the affair as carried out by the true-born Sons of Liberty. The notice of the proposed funeral of Liberty in Newport requested all "True Sons" to repair to the Coffee House, "but if there is any Bastard-kin, it is desired they would not sully his Memory with their Company." *Newport Mercury, Supplement*, Oct. 28, 1765. There seems to have been some dissension within the ranks of the New York group. See *Montresor Journals*, p. 347.

⁴¹ *Works of John Adams*, II, 178 ff., 183, 184.

⁴² *Belknap Papers*, (Massachusetts Historical Society), I, 61, and II, 111 f.; Rhode Island Historical Society, *Manuscripts*, XII, 67.

⁴³ I know of no other copy save that in William Gordon, *History of the Rise of Independence in America* (New York, 1794), I, 135 f., but from all I can gather it is substantially correct.

telling them of the rumor that troops were coming to enforce the Stamp Act. From New London they went to Norwich with the same story, urging that the agreement be adopted. Two others went to Boston, where they were admitted to the secret councils of the Sons of Liberty. The agents were told that there were three hundred men in Boston ready to arm on a moment's notice (probably a reference to Mackintosh and his followers), and forty thousand more in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. It was about this proposal that the Boston Liberty Boys consulted John Adams. Copies of the proposed association were sent to other New England towns and while only Connecticut seems to have entered into any agreement, everywhere there was interest.⁴⁴

The next step in the New York program was the formation of local societies. A meeting was held on January 7 and several resolutions were passed indicating a determination to oppose the enforcement of the Stamp Act. On February 4 it was decided to appoint a committee of correspondence, and it was this committee which did so much to unify the Sons of Liberty in the northern colonies. The complete program of the New York society, which it hoped all others would adopt, comprised the formation of associations of Liberty Boys everywhere, an attack on any one suspected of handling stamps and on the stamps themselves, and an attempt to get the business of courts and customs offices carried on as usual. To carry out this program letters were addressed to the leaders of the Sons of Liberty wherever known, urging them to call a general meeting of their group and present these plans.⁴⁵ Repeated attempts were made by the committee to build up a correspondence with the southern Liberty Boys looking to the formation of societies there, but to little avail. There were Sons of Liberty in all the southern colonies,

⁴⁴ See *The Fitch Papers* (Connecticut Historical Society, *Collections*, 1919-1920), II, 385-f.; *Works of John Adams*, II, 183 f.; *Lamb Papers*, p. 10. A statement from New Hampshire may be found in the *Belknap Papers*, III, 111 f. Colonel Israel Putnam sent advice that he would assist with the militia, but one would naturally expect this of the colonel. *Montresor Journals*, p. 350. There is some evidence of a similar spirit in New Jersey. Allicocke in a letter speaks of the rumors current in New York of defection there and in Philadelphia, "whereupon I was informed that our Liberty Boys were more than ordinarily enraged with their wonted Patriotic Fire, and I do verily believe, had there been truth in the assertion, a respectable Body of them would have filed off to the Southward and in their way would have been join'd with a noble passy of Jersey Folks, beside a succeeding Junction of Eastern Lads kept ready at a moments warning who upon occasion will swarm like the Industrious Bees. . . ." *Lamb papers*, p. 4. South Carolina offered similar assistance to Georgia. Jones, *History of Georgia*, II, 65.

⁴⁵ A careful analysis of this correspondence may be found in Becker, *Political Parties in New York*, pp. 46 ff.

but there is no evidence that they ever answered the letters of their northern friends.⁴⁶ In addition to the work of the New York group, an active correspondence advocating practically the same program was maintained among the New England towns, instigated as much in the first instance by Boston as by New York.⁴⁷

In consequence of the letters sent out by New York and the New England towns, meetings were held all over the northern colonies.⁴⁸ The resolutions adopted concurred in general with the suggestions offered. They expressed loyalty to George III. and abhorrence of the Stamp Act, which was called arbitrary, tyrannical, and unconstitutional; they announced a willingness to unite with other groups, and contained strong statements against any who would handle stamps, and equally strong statements in favor of those officers who would carry on business as usual. Recognizing the disapproval with which the better class viewed the Sons of Liberty the gatherings united in declaring themselves the true-born Sons of Liberty determined to maintain the peace of the community.

To strengthen the society some groups even attempted an intra-colonial organization by the method, so important later, of conventions. In Connecticut delegates from "a great majority" of the towns met in Hartford on March 25 and drew up resolutions concurring in general with the suggestions made by New York and Boston.⁴⁹ The colonial association in Maryland grew out of the

⁴⁶ Boston wrote Portsmouth that the circulars to the South had "produced the desired effect, as far as we have heard, so that we have the most sanguine hopes of being a united body from South Carolina to New Hampshire in a few Weeks. . . ." Notice that Georgia was not included, *Belknap Papers*, III, 119. Much the same information may be seen in Rhode Island Historical Society, *Manuscripts*, XII, 67; and *Lamb Papers*, p. 33.

⁴⁷ "We are writing to all the Towns in the Province to know their Dispositions. . . ." Boston to Portsmouth, Feb. 10, 1766. *Belknap Papers*, III, 114. An excellent example of this New England correspondence may be seen in the first letter of Providence to Newport, Mar. 20, 1766: "From Principles of Duty to our Sovereign, from what we owe to ourselves, to our fellow Subjects in America, and to our Posterity, we have associated, and firmly united to risque our Lives and Fortunes in supporting His Majesty's Government in these Colonies, according to its true Form and Texture; and to oppose with all our Might and Strength, any Invasions of our Rights and Privileges from His Majesty's Enemies." Rhode Island Historical Society, *Manuscripts*, XII, 64. See also *New Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 14, 1766.

⁴⁸ Though we have reason to believe that all the more important towns and many of the smaller ones had societies or groups styling themselves Sons of Liberty, it might be well to list here those towns which we know by direct evidence to have had them: in New Hampshire, Exeter, Portsmouth; in Massachusetts, Barnstable, Boston, Cambridge, Leominster, Marblehead, Newburyport, Plymouth, Salem; in Rhode Island, Providence, Newport; in Connecticut, Canterbury, Fairfield, Hartford, New Haven, New London, Norwich, Pomfret, Preston, Stratford, Wallingford, Windham; in New York, Albany, Huntington, New York City, Oyster Bay, White Plains; in Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and Essex and Sussex counties (Delaware); in New Jersey, Burlington, Freehold, Hunterdon, Middletown, New Brunswick, Piscataway, Salem, Sussex, Trenton, Woodbridge; in Maryland, Annapolis, Baltimore, Frederick, and the following counties: Anne Arundel, Ball, Cecil, Kent, Queen Anne, Somerset, Worcester; in Virginia, Leedstown, Norfolk, Richmond, Williamsburg; in North Carolina, Edenton, Brunswick, Newbern, Wilmington; in South Carolina, Charleston; in Georgia, Savannah. Evidence of others could be found no doubt.

⁴⁹ *Connecticut Courant*, Mar. 31, 1766. A suggestion that some such plan be adopted appeared in the *Connecticut Gazette*, Dec. 6, 1765.

attempt to open courts and customs houses, and since single groups were ineffective each town was requested to send a delegation to aid. This convention did meet and accomplished its purpose.⁵⁰ New Jersey worked out still more completely the details. Each town was to elect delegates to a county convention, which was to appoint a county committee of correspondence. From this county committee delegates were to be sent to a provincial convention, which in turn was to select a committee for the colony. How perfectly this plan was followed in practice does not appear.⁵¹

The second item in the program of the united Sons of Liberty was undying opposition to any who would enforce the Stamp Act. Though in many cases the Liberty Boys contented themselves with declaring offenders enemies to their country, in many others they set about intimidating them. A vigorous campaign was waged against all suspicious characters; if there was any wretch crawling upon the face of the earth who would urge submission to the act, said one orator, "it is no matter how soon he [is] put six foot below the surface of it."⁵² Feeling ran high, and those unfortunates who made themselves obnoxious to the Sons of Liberty often met with harsh treatment. Much time was spent in the coffee houses and taverns, where idle rumor flourished and wild talk often crystallized into action. Many a man's name came up before such gatherings; often notice was sent to him to appear in defense of his principles or actions; often the crowd, after a particularly stirring session, poured out of the tavern in an excess of enthusiasm, running down their victim. In this way many dubious characters served the restless spirit of the Sons of Liberty, keeping them united and alert. In general two groups received attention: those who dealt in any way with stamps or spoke favorably of the act, and those officials who showed a disposition to enforce the act. In the case of the former there was little difficulty about obtaining satisfaction, for most of them felt as did Samuel Waterhouse of Boston, who told the Sons of Liberty that he hadn't asked for the office of distributor, wouldn't accept it if offered, and would think himself "greatly ill

⁵⁰ *Maryland Gazette* (Green), Mar. 6, 20, and Apr. 3, 1766. Also *Lamb Papers*, p. 19, and two broadsides in the New York Historical Society, "The Proceedings of the Sons of Liberty of Baltimore-town."

⁵¹ *New York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy*, Mar. 6, 1766; *Lamb Papers*, p. 14.

⁵² *A Discourse, Addressed to the Sons of Liberty* (Providence, 1766), p. 7.

treated thereby" if offered it—as indeed he would have been! ⁵³ It was a similar case which led to the open formation of the Liberty Boys in one Virginia town. Hearing that Archibald Ritchie of Hobbs Hole had publicly declared that he would clear his vessel with stamped sailing orders, a group of people assembled at Leedstown to consider the situation. They took a solemn oath to associate together in defense of their rights infringed by the Stamp Act—particularly the right of trial by jury—and adopted strong resolutions against any user of stamps, declaring that they "*would convince every such Profligate, that immediate Danger and Disgrace shall attend their Prostitute Purpose.*" All associators were to notify others of violations of this pledge. Then, four hundred strong, they waited upon Ritchie, assuring him of their intention to strip him and tie him to a cart's tail unless he recanted. After some hesitation, probably to test the real temper of the crowd, he signed the statement demanded of him. ⁵⁴

More serious was the problem of those officials who would either enforce the act or close their offices. In some cases the matter was taken up by the civil authorities, but where the resolutions of towns or assemblies were insufficient the Sons of Liberty acted. The Providence society wrote complacently that business was going on as usual with them, but the Connecticut Boys were forced to admit that their greatest exertions were ineffectual. ⁵⁵ Equally so was the work of the New York Committee, but in Sussex County, Delaware, a visitation to the civil authorities produced the desired results. ⁵⁶ The New Jersey legislature as early as November 30 had authorized all government offices to continue, and all meetings of the Sons of Liberty indorsed resolutions asking offices to open, offering to support all who would disobey the Act. The last step was taken in February,

⁵³ *Boston Gazette*, Feb. 13, 1766. Waterhouse had previously come to the attention of the Sons of Liberty by making remarks unfavorable to them. *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 30, 1765, and Jan. 13, Feb. 3, 1766. The case of Lieutenant Hallam, which created so much excitement in New York, may be found in W. C. Abbott, *New York in the Revolution*, p. 65, and that of Henry Van Schaack in the *New York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy*, Jan. 22, 1766. In one case a man refused to pay a debt because the writ was not stamped. The people assembled and voted: "That this man is not a Christian. That he ought to be of some Religion. That he be a Jew. Whereupon, *Resolved*, That he be circumcised." Terrified, he recanted. *Boston Gazette*, Mar. 31, 1766.

⁵⁴ *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), May 16, 1766.

⁵⁵ See *Lamb Papers*, p. 21, and Rhode Island Historical Society, *Manuscripts*, XII, 70. "As to the Connecticut Courts they still continue inactive, tho' all possible Methods are by us taken to urge them on." Norwich Sons of Liberty to Portsmouth, *Belknap Papers*, III, 118. The customs houses were open. See L. H. Gipson, *Jared Ingersoll*, pp. 214 f.

⁵⁶ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Apr. 3, 1766.

when a deputation of the Liberty Boys gained the consent of the lawyers to resume business.⁵⁷ Similarly, the united Sons of Liberty in Maryland began their campaign to enforce the continuance of business in March, but it was not until delegations from all the counties called upon the justices that they finally agreed.⁵⁸ Virginia was slightly embarrassed by the constant requests to coöperate in this movement, for as Richard Henry Lee pointed out to his associates, the problem there was different. Virginia could best defeat the Act, it was felt, by refusing to open the courts, but the leaders did not want other colonies to get the impression that Virginia was lost to the cause of liberty.⁵⁹ In North Carolina the people were primarily concerned about the customs houses. On February 12 there appeared an article in the *North Carolina Gazette* urging the people to demand the return of certain vessels seized for lack of properly stamped papers. On the eighteenth the Sons of Liberty gathered at Wilmington and marched to Brunswick. For three days they argued with the governor and officers to no avail. So insistent was the crowd, however, that on the twenty-first the collectors of the port finally agreed to release the vessels. Their positions they had wisely resigned before appearing.⁶⁰

The third and last item in the general program of the Sons of Liberty was a declaration of war on all stamped paper. In spite of warnings, the storing of the stamps, and the resignation of the stamp distributors, some stamped paper did get into the colonies, largely from the West Indies, where the act was in force. It was generally agreed that a public example should be made of all such paper and its owners. The usual procedure was to exhibit during the day the sample found and to burn it in the evening, at which time the unlucky owner was required to take an oath that he had no more and would never again use any. All over the northern colonies such

⁵⁷ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Dec. 12, 1765, and Mar. 27, 1766; *New York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy*, Mar. 27, May 8, 1766; *Pennsylvania Journal*, Feb. 20, 1766.

⁵⁸ *Lamb Papers*, p. 19, *Maryland Gazette* (Green), Mar. 6, Apr. 3, 1766, "The Proceedings of the Sons of Liberty" (broad-sides, N. Y. Hist. Soc.).

⁵⁹ "I could wish some method were fallen upon, to inform the Northern Colonys, that our not following their example, proceeds from no regard for the Stamp Act, but the very different situation of our affairs from theirs with respect to Great Britain." *Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, I, 15.

⁶⁰ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), Mar. 21, 1766. Governor Tryon's account of this may be found in *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, VII, 169 ff.

exhibitions took place during the late winter and spring of 1766.⁶¹ William Bradford of Philadelphia even notified the New York committee of the presence of stamps there, reproving them for their laxity in not searching these out and burning them.⁶² So important did the Sons of Liberty deem these demonstrations in keeping alive public interest that they selected a day on which the groups were to unite in an exhibition of this sort. The Boston letter to Portsmouth communicating this decision even outlined the procedure to be followed and the toasts to be drunk after the burning.⁶³

Aside from this general program other suggestions were made, two of which are of sufficient importance to engage our attention. The first seems to have originated with Providence. At a meeting of the Liberty Boys on March 15 a resolution was adopted recommending an agreement to prevent all commerce with those colonies which permitted the use of stamps, and a circular letter was sent to the other New England towns, which replied that they were heartily in favor of some such plan.⁶⁴ The second suggestion originated with Boston in the fertile mind of either Samuel Adams or Jonathan Mayhew. This was a proposal that even in the event of a repeal a union of writers should be established in each colony "to prevent the cunning & Artifice of some designing Men who perhaps may attempt some other Method to enforce their Schemes."⁶⁵ This proposal also met with approval, and New York added the suggestion that if the act were enforced a convention of the Sons of Liberty

⁶¹ E.g., the Portsmouth Sons called a meeting of the society to obtain satisfaction from Joseph Leigh for having a stamped bond. *New Hampshire Gazette*, Mar. 23, 1766. Demonstrations were held in nearly all the northern coast towns; very few stamps got inland. See *Boston Gazette*, Feb. 3, 24, and Mar. 3, 1766; *Montresor Journals*, pp. 344, 345, 358; *Lamb Papers*, p. 8a.

⁶² A Mr. Pintard, owner of a stamped Mediterranean bond, and Charles Williams, the signer, were the ones named by Bradford. These two were hunted up and threatened with harsh treatment, but were saved by some clergyman, to whom they made their confessions. *New York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy*, Feb. 20, 1766; *Montresor Journals*, pp. 349, 350.

⁶³ The *Massachusetts Gazette*, Feb. 20, 1766, gives the general plan. The Boston letter is worth quoting in full. "Enclosed you will find a Portion of that detestable Paper mark'd with AMERICA'S OPPRESSION it being half that we obtain'd of a Brother of ours from another Colony which we intend to exhibit with chains &c. next Thursday in a Public Manner on Liberty Tree—The Occasion of our delaying is, that we may have them exhibited at one Time—It will be taken down at 12 O'Clock by a Common Execution[er] and burnt—Let us show as much abhorrence as possible—After which We propose to have the following Toasts drank—George the third, our gracious, rightful and Lawful Sovereign—Succession to the Royal House of Hanover—Confusion to its Enemies—Success to the Foes of the Stamp-Act—A perpetual Itching without the Benefit of Scratching to the Friends of the same—Long Life Health & Prosperity to all the Sons of Liberty on the Continent—" *Belknap Papers*, III, 116. The letter is dated February 17, 1766.

⁶⁴ *Newport Mercury*, Mar. 24, 1766; Rhode Island Historical Society, *Manuscripts*, XII, 64, 65, 66; *Belknap Papers*, III, 122.

⁶⁵ Rhode Island Historical Society, *Manuscripts*, XII, 67. Mayhew made a suggestion that the colonial assemblies undertake this task. Alden Bradford, *Life of Jonathan Mayhew*, pp. 428 ff. Adams wrote the letter to Providence.

should be called.⁶⁶ The repeal nullified this proposal and there is no evidence that Boston's union of writers ever materialized until the idea along with others bore fruit in the committees of correspondence.

Meantime, during the progress of these plans, local units of the Sons of Liberty were carrying out a few private affairs of their own. The New York committee was engaging in all sorts of activity: aiding the merchants in enforcing the non-importation agreement, deciding whether or not groups of strolling players might act, encouraging the hundreds of little boys who frequently tramped the streets at night shouting "Liberty and No Stamps!," even entering into negotiations with the Indians of the Six Nations looking to a defensive alliance against His Majesty's troops.⁶⁷ Other groups were setting up Liberty Poles, or Trees, to act as a constant reminder of the threatened invasion of American rights,⁶⁸ and still others were commending their local celebrities for their energy in defending those rights.⁶⁹

News of the repeal cut short all further plans. Plots and machinations were swallowed up in the wave of rejoicing which swept over the country. Bells rang and cannon boomed; messengers in hot haste spread the joyful tidings to the farthest reaches of the colonies. Everywhere it was the same story. Northwards the Sons of Liberty staged celebrations during the day and at night gentlemen kept open house, serving refreshment to the perennially thirsty Liberty Boys.⁷⁰ To the south there were the same celebrations during the day, and at night gentlemen danced while commoners sat around huge bonfires drinking toasts, each one a full bumper, until gentlemen could not turn another step and Liberty Boys could not hold another glass.⁷¹ The struggle was over, and peace reigned.

⁶⁶ *Lamb Papers*, p. 30.

⁶⁷ *Montresor Journals*, pp. 353, 362, 364, 367 f.; *New York Mercury*, Apr. 28, 1766.

⁶⁸ E.g., Braintree, Boston, Newport. *Works of John Adams*, II, 194, and *Boston Gazette*, Apr. 28, 1766.

⁶⁹ For example, the Norfolk Sons of Liberty publicly thanked Richard Bland for his pamphlet on the Stamp Act. *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), May 30, 1766.

⁷⁰ Only one illustration need be given. The Boston Boys constructed an elaborate pyramid engraved on all sides with very poor poetry. Their sisters, the Daughters of Liberty, viewed the whole affair from the balconies along King Street, and at night Otis and Hancock served drinks. *Boston Gazette*, May 26, 1766.

⁷¹ Again only one illustration is necessary. At Williamsburg and Hampton Court House there was a ball and supper, with a bonfire and refreshments for the commonalty. *Virginia Gazette*, (Purdie), June 13, 20, 1766.