

1774 IN REVIEW:

What a year it must have been for Polly . . . (Part 1)

Making sense of a senseless act

After witnessing the destruction of the tea on December 16, 1773, Polly must have been rather perplexed. Having recently arrived in Boston, the British fashion doll was probably trying to reconcile the reality of what had just happened with her sense of propriety and refined taste.

For days leading up to the Tea Party, she had watched from her perch in the shop window as crowds of local citizens gathered for the public meetings that had overflowed Faneuil Hall and been moved up to the larger meeting space at the Old South Meeting House. Nineteenth century biographer Caro Atherton Dugan suggests that she saw Paul Revere and the fiery Puritan preacher, Mather Byles, but of course there is no record of this, *per se*.ⁱ She certainly couldn't have missed seeing Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, and John Hancock (who likely arrived in his ostentatious carriage attended by his entourage of liveried footmen). She would have had little reason to know any of the countless others, but she couldn't have missed observing that the arrival of the tea had riled up the local populace.

Of course, with roots in British high-society, and little prior exposure to popular protest, she is not likely to have had much sympathy with the local populace, nor with any notion that the king or Parliament could be fallible. She overheard the conversations in the shop between the shopkeeper and his loyal customers, most of whom would not have been very sympathetic to the protesters. Why shouldn't Parliament tax the tea? They had every right to pass appropriate laws for the governance of the colony. No, the tea tax wasn't part of some elaborate, sinister scheme to establish Parliament's right to tax the colonies. Nor was the tax, itself, the problem. The problem was the rabble and their leaders, Sam Adams and Joseph Warren, and the likes of William Molineux, who seemed to think that they knew better what was good for them than the honorable members of the governing class. During the past decade, the Boston mobs had repeatedly demonstrated their disregard for established law, and their willingness to destroy property to make their points and intimidate their rivals.

As 1774 dawned, Polly could not have agreed with John Adams, who praised the dumping of the tea as "magnificent," and "an Epocha in History."ⁱⁱ Adams was a respectable lawyer, but Polly would have agreed with the large numbers of law-abiding colonists who considered the destruction of the tea to be hasty, rash, and simply wrong. Could violence ever be justified, even in defense of one's natural rights and constitutional liberties?

How much more confusing it must have been for Polly to have been adopted by a family that was sympathetic to the protestors. Both Mr. and Mrs. Williams families were of high standing, deeply rooted in colonial society. Mrs. Williams was a Sumner, with family connections to the famous Puritan preachers Increase Mather and Cotton Mather. Mr. Williams' family included colonial military leadership. Despite the family's connections to the power elite, their sentiments lay with what one official called "the defense of those rights and privileges, civil and religious, which we esteem more valuable than our lives," even while assuring others that "we have the highest esteem for all lawful authority; and rejoice in our connection with Great Britain, so long as we can enjoy our charter rights and privileges."ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus, Polly's conundrum. Despite her preconceptions, it was impossible for Polly to escape the conflicting influences of Colonial Boston. Slowly, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, she was beginning to see things a little differently from when she first arrived.

Parliament lays down the law

While the debate raged throughout the colonies about whether the Bostonians had overstepped by destroying the tea, news of the Port of Boston Act arrived in the colonies the following spring. Parliament had decided to punish Boston by closing the port to all commercial shipping until Bostonians made restitution for the tea. Polly may have figured that the punishment was just. Or, perhaps influenced by her new playmate, Amy Sumner (Mrs. Williams' younger sister), she may have winced at the excessive punishment.

But what to do about it? Polly undoubtedly heard both sides of the ensuing conversation. Now it hardly mattered whether the dumping of the tea was justified. Now the question was how to respond to the closing of the harbor. Some advocated paying for the tea, but there was little serious movement toward making that happen. Boston's rebel leadership called upon the other colonies to join them in an immediate colonies-wide boycott of all trade with the mother country. Others (including Hancock), perhaps concerned about whether the other colonies would join a Boston-led boycott, advocated convening a "general Congress of Deputies" from the legislative Assemblies of all the American colonies. Polly and Amy may well have been more content playing amid the haunts of Roxbury than worrying too much about which course of action made the most sense. Which is probably good, because there seemed to be no easy consensus.

Parliament, however, was not done with its punishment. In quick succession came news of the Massachusetts Government Act, which effectively suspended the elected government of the colony, replacing colonial officials at all levels with Royal appointees; then came the Administration of Justice Act, which provided for moving jury trials to England to prevent colonial influences from biasing the verdicts. "Amounting to an Act to cut our Throats with

Impunity,”^{iv} the Administration of Justice Act was quickly dubbed “the Murder Act.” In mid-May, General Gage arrived with fresh troops to close the harbor and curb further disobedience of crown authority. The crescendo of outrage certainly reached Polly’s ears in Roxbury.

The punishment backfires

Any hope of compromise or de-escalation of the situation was quickly dwindling. Polly could not have escaped the reality that things were getting out of hand.

In the absence of a consensus, individual communities began adopting home-grown trade embargos in the form of local and regional non-purchase agreements. The calls for a continent-wide Congress of Deputies finally coalesced, and a date was set for early September, in Philadelphia. This would later come to be known as the First Continental Congress,

Meanwhile, In August, Gage moved to swear in the new Crown appointees to the Governor’s Council, known as Mandamus Councilors. This unleashed a frenzy of intimidation, indignity, and insult from the enraged public. Polly was embarrassed for Gage. Mercy Otis Warren mocked it as “the last comic scene we shall see Exhibite’d in the state Farce which has for several years been playing off.”^v Of the 36 appointees, 11 had declined to serve, and 9 more resigned soon afterward in the face of extreme local pressure. Without exception, councilors serving from other parts of Massachusetts were all driven into exile in Boston to the relative protection of British troops, by their angry constituents.

As a precaution against the growing tide of colonial discontent, Gage dispatched a patrol of soldiers into Charlestown (now Somerville) in the early morning of September 1, to remove 250 half-barrels of gunpowder stored in the local powder magazine. The mission successfully secured the powder, but Polly noticed that in the process it sparked a panicked, chaotic, spontaneous outpouring from thousands of armed and unarmed local citizens who marched to Cambridge the following day.

She noticed, also, a hardening of resolve among her Roxbury neighbors. Shortly thereafter, elsewhere in the colony, crowds of local inhabitants began turning out to shut down court proceedings that were presided over by Crown-appointed judges, and to force the Crown-appointed judges to resign. The countryside was up in arms; Crown authority was effectively silenced.

From bad to worse

As provided in the Port Act, the Massachusetts House of Representatives had been meeting in Salem during that summer of 1774, not in Boston. Now with feverish resistance to Crown

authority erupting across the colony, Gage preemptively dissolved an early October meeting of the assembly. The delegates convened in defiance, declared themselves the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, then adjourned to reconvene in Concord.

There, as a shadow government, they began preparations for the increasing likelihood of armed conflict. Polly fretted, as they called for towns to organize fast-response companies from the militia (called “minutemen”) to respond quickly in cases of emergency, and as they began to stockpile weapons and provisions to sustain a rebel army in the field.

Meanwhile, the Continental Congress in Philadelphia adopted provisions for a long-awaited, colonies-wide, unified agreement dealing with non-consumption, non-importation, and non-exportation, to be enforced by local “committees of observation and inspection.” More importantly to Polly, it also dispatched a petition to the king reiterating their loyalty and asking for his help in resolving their grievances. Now she began to hope for a break in the tension and a reconciliation of the parties.

But the overture to the king fell on deaf ears. As the year-end approached, the king banned the exportation of arms and ammunition to America, and fear permeated the colonies of impending British military aggression. The prospect was alarming. The heightened tensions sparked the burning of a tea-carrying ship in Annapolis, an attempt to seize an arms shipment in New York, preemptive local seizures of cannons in Newport and New London, and the storming of a fort in Portsmouth harbor to thwart a feared British seizure of its armaments.

As 1775 dawned, there was no mistaking that the colonies were on the brink of war. The pot hadn’t yet boiled over, but Polly feared rightly that at any moment it could. All year, she had wondered if her British roots were compatible with living in America. She still wasn’t sure. But her righteous attitude as a British fashion doll had been challenged, and her empathy for the colonies had been awakened. For Polly Sumner, things would never be the same.

ⁱ Caro Atherton Dugan, “A Historic Doll,” *New England Magazine*, Vol. 14, No. 3, May 1893

ⁱⁱ John Adams, in his diary, December 17, 1773

ⁱⁱⁱ Expressed by Eleazer Brooks in a letter from the Lincoln (MA) Committee of Correspondence in response to a request from the Boston Committee of Correspondence, and approved by the Lincoln Town Meeting on December 27, 1773. Spelling and punctuation as cleaned up by Paul Brooks, *Trial by Fire: Lincoln Massachusetts and the War for Independence*, Lincoln 1975 Bicentennial Commission, 1975, p. 6.

^{iv} Mary Beth Norton, *1774: the Long Year of Revolution*, attributed to John Watts of New York, pp. 133, 389.

^v Norton, 1774, p.163.