

What a year it must have been for Polly . . .

Part 2: Jan/Feb 1775 in Review



Annie Williams Langley (age ~3) shown with Polly Sumner, circa 1882. Annie was the fourth generation in the Sumner/ Williams/Langley family to play with the doll.

As 1775 dawned, Polly Sumner was still trying to reconcile the growing popular resistance to British rule in Boston with her British roots. A year after the dumping of the tea into Boston harbor, and seven months after the Coercive Acts closed the Port of Boston and upended elective government in Massachusetts, there was little to encourage any hope of compromise. There was widespread consensus throughout the colonies that the Coercive Acts had to be repealed, but beyond that everyone seemed to have a different idea of the best way forward. Increasingly, there seemed to be a general sense that a final crisis was looming. Polly's predisposed British loyalties must have been severely challenged.

The local committees of inspection authorized by the Continental Congress to monitor compliance with non-importation and non-consumption of British goods, had sprung into being, but compliance was irregular. And the mere fact of the existence of watchdog committees turned some who were otherwise sympathetic to the British boycott against it.[\[1\]](#)

Polly might also have been troubled—as many colonists were—that in many cases, the Continental Congress delegates and members of local committees of inspection had been chosen by extra-legal gatherings and regional meetings. This left the Continental Congress and the committees open to controversy as to their legitimacy and authority.^[2]

King George III had still not responded to the petition from the Continental Congress the previous fall requesting relief from the Coercive Acts.^[3] But now in January, news arrived of his November 30th address to Parliament. Full of defiance, he blamed the colonies for their “most daring spirit of resistance...[and] fresh violence.” He assured Parliament of his determination to enforce the Coercive Acts, and of his “firm and steadfast resolution” to affirm Parliament’s supreme authority over every dominion of his realm.^[4]

No further response was needed. “The die is cast,” wrote Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren.^[5] And Polly would certainly have felt the tension in the Williams household.

It had been a year since Polly had become the happy playmate of Amy Sumner, daughter of one of Roxbury’s leading families, who were strong supporters of the colonial resistance. It had been a year of soul-searching for Polly, as she had tried to reconcile the string of increasingly troublesome events with her British origin. [\[Click here to read Part 1\]](#) She and Amy (Mrs. Williams’ younger sister), had bonded instantly, and there is little doubt that Polly was hearing the news at least partially filtered through a partisan lens. But Polly was proud of who she was, and like many others in colonial America, she was still working through the apparently irreconcilable differences in perspective.

It didn’t help that both sides seemed increasingly to be girding for war. The Massachusetts Provincial Congress had urged towns to form and equip Minute Companies to respond quickly in case of a possible incursion of British troops into the countryside. General Gage continued to collect intelligence from his network of spies. Polly’s anxiety certainly reflected the general mood of expectation of an impending crisis.

February first was the day decreed by the Continental Congress, that ALL purchases of tea from any source—including smuggled tea from the Netherlands—were supposed to end. But compliance remained inconsistent, and the public debate about finding a way forward continued its divisive tone.

General Gage continued to be concerned about provincial stockpiles of arms and ammunition in the countryside. The previous September, he had sent a patrol to Charlestown to secure 250 half-barrels of black powder, and in December, rumors of a similar incursion to Portsmouth had sparked preemptive local action. Now at the end of February, Gage determined to seize 8 cannons reported to be in colonial hands in Salem. He dispatched a party of 1,000 men by ship to Marblehead on a Sabbath morning, from

where they marched the remaining several miles to Salem, planning to catch the locals unprepared. However, upon arriving in Salem, they found that their expedition was no longer a surprise. The locals had raised the drawbridge over the North River to block their advance. After numerous threats and British attempts to circumvent the road block, a negotiated, face-saving settlement lowered the drawbridge. The British troops crossed the bridge, marched 1,000 yards, then abruptly did an about face, returning to Boston to report to Gage that the mission had been carried out, but that the cannons had not been found.

As spring approached, Polly would certainly have been troubled by the increasingly militant attitudes on both sides of the issue. Both camps boldly predicted certain victory should armed conflict ensue. Neither camp wanted war, but neither was willing to back down, either. “How much Longer sir do you think the political scale Can Hang in Equilibrium?” Mercy Otis Warren asked John Adams^[6], perhaps rhetorically. There was no way to know. And so, for Polly—and for most others—anxiety was palpable as the equilibrium looked increasingly unstable.

^[1] Mary Beth Norton, *1774: the Long Year of Revolution*, pp. 276, 278, 279-281.

^[2] Norton, pp. 261-263, 269, 281+

^[3] In fact, the petition may never have reached the king. After having been damaged in a storm at sea, a second copy was sent from Philadelphia on November 6, 1774, arriving in London on December 14. Despite assurances that the petition would be presented as soon as possible, it was not presented to Parliament until January 19, 1775. Parliament evidently failed to recommend any action or take further notice, as the petition appears to have sat in limbo, at least through February 5, intermingled with “a great Heap of letters of Intelligence from Governors and officers in America, Newspapers, Pamphlets, Handbills, etc.[and] laid upon the Table with them.” Wolf, Edwin (1965). “The Authorship of the 1774 Address to the King Restudied”. *The William and Mary Quarterly*. **22** (2). Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture: pp. 192-193. Smyth, *Writings of Franklin*, (February 5, 1775) p. 304.

^[4] Norton, pp. 311-312

^[5] Norton, p. 312

^[6] Norton, p. 329