

CHAPTER 1

Ye Olde Media

CONTAINING REFLECTIONS ON NATIONS FOUNDED IN
REVOLUTIONS—AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR CHARACTERS—A
HISTORY OF THE STAMP ACT—THE BIRTH, DEATH, AND
RESURRECTION OF THE NEWSPAPER—ITS DIRE FATE, OF
LATE—AND A VISIT TO THE GREEN DRAGON TAVERN

“Everybody, anywhere I go, always asks me, ‘Where did you get that hat?’” Austin Hess told me, when we first met, beside a statue of Samuel Adams in front of Faneuil Hall. Hess, a twenty-six-year-old engineer and member of the steering committee of the Boston Tea Party, was wearing a tricornered hat: not your ordinary felt-and-cardboard fake but the genuine article, wide-brimmed and raffish. In April of 2009, two months after Rick Santelli, outraged by the Obama administration’s stimulus package, called for a new tea party, Hess showed up at a Tax Day rally on the Boston Common. He was carrying a sign that read “I Can Stimulate Myself.” He was much photographed; he appeared on television, a local Fox affiliate. He was wearing his hat. He got it at Plimoth Plantation. It was made of “distressed faux leather.” You could order it on-line. It was called the Scallywag.¹

The importance of the American Revolution to the twenty-first-century Tea Party movement might seem to have been slight—as if the name were mere happenstance, the knee

breeches knickknacks, the rhetoric of revolution unthinking—but that was not entirely the case, especially in Boston, where the local chapter of the Tea Party bore a particular burden: it happened here. “Everybody in the movement is interested in the Revolution,” Hess told me. He took his debt to the founders seriously: “We believe that we are carrying on their tradition, and if they were around today, they would be in the streets with us, leading us, and they’d be even angrier than we are. I imagine we’d have to politely ask them to leave their muskets at home.”

“Who shall write the history of the American revolution?” John Adams once asked Thomas Jefferson. “Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?” “Nobody,” was Jefferson’s reply. “The life and soul of history must forever remain unknown.”³ The records were murky, the course of events astonishing, the consequences immeasurable. Nobody could write the history of the Revolution, but everyone would have to try; it was too important not to. There was also this dilemma: a nation born in revolution will always eye its history warily, and with anxiety. It’s good that it happened once; twice could be trouble. The Revolution’s first historian, Peter Oliver, was a Loyalist from Boston. Consumed by bitterness, regret, and rancor, he wrote the “Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion” in 1781, from exile in England. He didn’t think the Revolution should have happened even once.⁴ The first patriot historian of the Revolution, David Ramsay, a physician who had been a delegate to the Continental Congress from South Carolina and whose two-volume history was published in 1789, stated the problem as well as anyone. “The right of the people to resist their rulers, when invading their liberties, forms the corner stone of the American republic,” Ramsay wrote in *The History of the American*

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Revolution, but “this principle, though just in itself, is not favourable to the tranquility of present establishments.”⁵ Ramsay appreciated the acuteness of the difficulty: celebrating the birth of the nation, and carrying on in its spirit, risked promoting still more revolution, unrest, impermanence, and instability, when what the new nation needed was calm. “A little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing,” Jefferson wrote from Paris in 1786, on hearing word of Shays’s Rebellion, an armed uprising by farmers from Massachusetts struggling to stay out of debtors’ prison. “The Tree of Liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” Jefferson wrote then.⁶ (This menacing line sometimes appeared on Tea Party paraphernalia, but it was far more popular in the 1990s, among members of that decade’s militia movement. On April 19, 1995, the 220th anniversary of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, Timothy McVeigh, who liked to wear a Tree of Liberty T-shirt, blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, including 19 very young children.)⁷ But aside from Jefferson, whose enthusiasm for revolution did not survive Robespierre, most everyone else came down in favor of order. “In monarchies the crime of treason or rebellion may admit of being pardoned, or lightly punished,” Samuel Adams wrote, during the Shays crisis, “but the man who dares to rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death.”⁸ James Madison believed America’s was a revolution to end all revolutions. And the Constitution, of course, sought “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Domestic tranquility was what was called for. The Constitution helped contain the unruliness of

the Revolution. So did early accounts of the nation's founding, which tended to emphasize that a revolution had to know when to stop. For the sake of the nation, revolution needed to be a thing of the past.

Meanwhile, though, the Revolution was so brilliant and daring—and, of course, so original and definitive and constitutive—that everyone wanted to claim to have inherited it, especially when running for office or starting a movement or pushing through a piece of legislation. Beginning even before it was over, the Revolution has been put to wildly varying political purposes. Federalists claimed its legacy; so did Anti-Federalists. Supporters of Andrew Jackson's Democratic Party said they were the true sons of the Revolution. No, Whigs said: we are. The Union claimed the Revolution; so, just as fervently, did the Confederacy.⁹ In the 1950s, southern segregationists insisted that they were upholding the legacy of the Founding Fathers by adhering to the Constitution. "There is nothing in the United States Constitution that gives the Congress, the President, or the Supreme Court the right to declare that white and colored children must attend the same public schools," said Mississippi senator James Eastland. Advocates of civil rights countered that their movement carried the banner of the Revolution. "Our nation in a sense came into being through a massive act of civil disobedience," Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "for the Boston Tea Party was nothing but a massive act of civil disobedience." A lot of people talked about the 1964 Civil Rights Act as realizing, at long last, the promise of the Declaration of Independence. Lyndon Johnson compared Selma to Lexington and Concord. The 1965 Voting Rights Act was said to be an end to taxation without representation. "Black people are rebelling in the same way Americans did in the Boston Massacre," Stokely Carmichael

said in 1966.¹⁰ That same year, when Johnson signed into law a bill establishing an American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, he used the opportunity to argue for American involvement in Southeast Asia. “Today, the Vietnamese people are fighting for their freedom in South Vietnam. We are carrying forward our great heritage by helping to sustain their efforts.”¹¹ One year later, at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta, King said, “We still need some Paul Revere of conscience to alert every hamlet and every village of America that revolution is still at hand.”¹² What all these people meant by “revolution,” of course, was different.

“What do We Mean by the Revolution?” Adams asked Jefferson. “The War? That was no part of the revolution. It was only an Effect and Consequence of it. The Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and this was effected from 1760–1775, in the course of fifteen Years, before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington.”¹³ Adams, like many people, had no doubt that the Revolution had begun in Boston. Oliver thought Massachusetts was “the *Volcano* from whence issued all the Smoak, Flame & Lava, which has since enveloped the whole British american continent.”¹⁴ Adams believed the Revolution began in 1760 because, in August of that year, Massachusetts’ new, royally appointed governor, Francis Bernard, arrived to find a city in ruins, ravaged, just months before, by the worst fire in any colonial American city, ever. But the city was suffering from worse than fire. Massachusetts had sent more men to fight in the French and Indian War than all of the other colonies combined. Known in Europe as the Seven Years’ War, the fighting had started in 1756. Many Massachusetts men had fallen; many more were still to die, buried in unmarked graves, far from home. Boston in 1760 was a city of widows and orphans and wounded soldiers, of struggling

artisans and smuggling merchants. Its newspapers were filled with notices of runaway apprentices, of slaves for sale, of bankrupted estates.¹⁵ That December, Boston's James Otis Jr., a thirty-six-year-old lawyer, the most brilliant legal mind of his generation, agreed to take a case arguing against Bernard that the government had acted with arbitrary authority in using an instrument known as writs of assistance to search and seize city merchants' property as part of a campaign against illicit trade.¹⁶ (Otis had another beef with Bernard, who had passed over his father, James Otis Sr., to appoint Thomas Hutchinson as chief of the colony's Superior Court.) The following February, Otis argued the writs of assistance case, which is why Peter Oliver, who also served on the Superior Court, and was Hutchinson's brother-in-law, started his history in 1761. The showdown took place in Boston's Town House (now the Old State House), a three-story Georgian whose east-end gable was topped with gilt statues of the lion and the unicorn, mythical symbols of the British Crown. The Town House sat in the middle of King Street (now State Street), in the heart of the city. The case was heard in the Governor's Council Chamber, on the second floor, a room that boasted an elegant prospect, a wondrous view, straight down the Long Wharf and across the harbor, looking wistfully and a little desperately back to London. John Adams, who was, at the time, an assistant of Otis's law partner, sat among the spectators, in a room tricked out with every trapping of luxury—red velvet-covered mahogany chairs and even ornamented brass spittoons—and of royal authority: Bernard had brought with him full-length portraits of George II and George III to hang alongside the king's arms and a vast map of London.¹⁷ Of Otis's fiery performance that day, Adams later wrote, "American independence was then and there born."¹⁸

Meanwhile, an ocean away, the *Phillis*, a two-masted, square-rigged ship piloted by Peter Gwin, was cruising the Guinea coast of Africa. After trading English goods for African slaves, Gwin prepared to head to New England. He had sailed to Boston before. He knew how to navigate through the perilous entrance to Boston's harbor, dotted with rocks and shoals and more than thirty islands, tiny and treacherous. Once he got past Castle William, the water would be calmer and the hazards fewer. And then, what beauty, what depths. Wrote one traveler, "within the harbor there is room enough for five hundred sail to lie at an anchor."¹⁹ A sea captain's paradise.

The *Phillis* reached Boston in July of 1761, dropping anchor alongside the Long Wharf, the longest wharf—and the biggest commercial structure—in all of America: 150 feet wide and an audacious 2,000 feet long. On eighteenth-century maps, it looks like a finger pointing across the ocean, pointing home. Gwin's first order of business was to carry his bill of lading the length of the wharf, covered with warehouses and shops, and up the hill to the Customs House, built of rough-hewn stone. To get there, he had to make his way through the dockside bustle of sailors and shipwrights, hawkers and shopkeepers, fishwives and whores, artisans and merchants, the sons and daughters of Europe, Africa, and America. In a city of fifteen thousand people, about a thousand were black, and of that thousand, only eighteen were free.²⁰ The day Gwin's *Phillis* cleared customs, twenty-two other ships had dropped anchor offshore or tied their leading ropes to the town's fifty-seven wharves. They had sailed from the north: Newfoundland, Quebec; from the south: Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Philadelphia, Maryland, Virginia, St. Kitts, Nevis, Bermuda; and from the east, all

the way across the wide water: Liverpool and London. Gwin went to the print shop of Benjamin Edes and John Gill, on Queen Street, next door to the town jail, to place an ad in the *Boston Gazette*:

JUST Imported,
From AFRICA.

A Number of prime young SLAVES, from the Windward Coast, and to be Sold on board Capt. Gwin lying at New-Boston.

This notice caught the eye of a tailor named John Wheatley, who kept a shop on the corner of King Street and Mackerel Lane. Wheatley and his wife, Susanna, took a chaise to the wharf, boarded the ship, and inspected the cargo, men, women, and children brought out of the fetid obscurity below decks to squint against the sun glinting off the water. The girl had lost her two front teeth. That put her at about seven years old. Maybe eight. She was skinny and sick and nearly naked. She was half dead. The captain wanted her off his hands. Wheatley bought her “for a trifle.” His wife named her after the ship.²¹

That girl would one day chronicle the birth of the United States:

Columbia’s scenes of glorious toils I write. . . .
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!²²

Phillis Wheatley’s revolution began in 1761.

The French and Indian War ended in 1763. The imperial coffers were empty: half of Britain’s revenues went to paying

interest on the war debt. The colonies cost us this war, and the colonists should at least help pay for it, was the logic of George Grenville, the new prime minister. The next year, Parliament passed the Sugar and Currency Acts and warned of a Stamp Act to come. That's why David Ramsay, in his *History*, dated the beginning of the Revolution to 1764. So did Mercy Otis Warren, James Otis's sister, in her three-volume *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, published in 1805. Mercy Otis, born on Cape Cod in 1728, was three years younger than her brother. Like most girls, she had no formal schooling; instead, she read her brother's books and soaked up his Harvard education. She married James Warren in 1754; they settled in Plymouth. Between 1757 and 1766, she gave birth to five sons. When she wrote her history, she apologized for writing at all—this was man's work—but assured her reader that writing history hadn't hardened her: "The historian has never laid aside the tenderness of the sex."²³

Warren sited the Revolution's beginning in a room in Boston's Town House just across from the Governor's Council Chamber, Representatives Hall, where her brother, behind the oak speaker's desk, declared taxation without representation to be tyranny. To be governed without consent, to be taxed without representation, Americans liked to argue, "is worse than Death—it is SLAVERY!"²⁴ This wasn't simply a rhetorical flourish. It was, instead, something between a metaphor and a definition: taxation without representation is slavery.²⁵ Stephen Hopkins, the governor of Rhode Island, wrote, "those who are governed by the will of another, or of others, and whose property may be taken from them by taxes, or otherwise, without their consent, and against their will, are in the miserable condition of slaves."²⁶ In *The Rights*

of *the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*, published in 1764, Otis followed the implications of this argument. “Are not women born as free as men? Would it not be infamous to assert that the ladies are all slaves by nature?” And then he argued, at length, on hypocrisy:

The Colonists are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black. . . . Does it follow that tis right to enslave a man because he is black? Will short curl'd hair like wool . . . help the argument?

No, was Otis’s unequivocal answer:

Nothing better can be said in favor of a trade, that is the most shocking violation of the law of nature, has a direct tendency to diminish the inestimable value of liberty, and makes every dealer in it a tyrant, from the director of an African company to the petty chapman in needles and pins on the unhappy coast. It is a clear truth, that those who every day barter away other men’s liberty, will soon care little for their own.²⁷

At the time, not everyone could see that as well as Otis did.

Despite colonial opposition to the Sugar and Currency Acts, Parliament passed the Stamp Act the next year, requiring government-issued stamps on pages of printed paper—on, that is, everything from indenture agreements to bills of credit to playing cards. It infuriated many colonists, who were outraged at Parliament’s tyrannical reach. “We won’t be their negroes,” John Adams wrote. The Stamp Act cost lawyers and merchants a few farthings, but it hit printers very hard, requiring them to affix stamps to the pages of their newspapers and to pay stamp collectors a halfpenny for every half sheet—amounting, ordinarily, to a penny for every copy of every issue of every newspaper—and, as if that weren’t

burden enough, a two shillings' tax on every advertisement. The first cost would drive away subscribers; the second would daunt advertisers. No paper could survive.²⁸

Understanding the Stamp Act requires knowing a bit about the history of newspapers. Newspapers date to the sixteenth century; they started as newsletters and newsbooks, copied by hand and sent from one place to another, carrying word of trade and politics. Venetians sold news for a coin called a *gazetta*. Germans read *Zeitungen*; the French perused *nouvelles*; the English paged through intelligencers. The word “newspaper” didn’t enter the English language until the 1660s. The *London Gazette* began in 1665. Its news was mostly old, foreign, and unreliable, so unreliable that, in English, the word “gazette” meant, well into the eighteenth century, “rumor-monger.” Because early newspapers tended either to arm or to take aim at people in power, they were also sometimes called “paper bullets.” In early America, printers were also the editors of the newspapers, and, often, their chief writers. They tended toward irreverence. The first newspaper in the British American colonies, *Publick Occurrences*, was printed in Boston in 1690. It was shut down after just one issue for reporting, among other things, that the king of France had cuckolded his own son. Propping up power is, generally, a less dodgy proposition than defying it. The *Boston News-Letter*, “published by authority”—endorsed by magistrates and ecclesiastics—lasted from 1704 till 1776. In 1719, two more colonial papers began printing: the *Boston Gazette* and, out of Philadelphia, the *American Weekly Mercury*.²⁹ (Nearly every early American newspaper was issued weekly; it took sixteen hours to set the type for a standard four-page paper.)³⁰ But James Franklin’s *New-England Courant*, launched in 1721, marks the real birth of the American newspaper. It was

the first unlicensed paper in the colonies—published without authority—and, while it lasted, it was also, by far, the best. Every other paper looks a rag. The *Courant* contained political essays, opinion, satire, and some word of goings-on. Franklin was the first newspaperman, anywhere in the world, to report the results of a legislative vote count. The *Boston News-Letter* contained, besides the shipping news, tiresome government pronouncements, letters from Europe, and whatever smattering of local news was bland enough to pass the censor. Franklin had a different editorial policy: “I hereby invite all Men, who have Leisure, Inclination and Ability, to speak their Minds with Freedom, Sense and Moderation, and their Pieces shall be welcome to a Place in my Paper.”³¹

Franklin was, as a printer, bold unto recklessness. He set as his task the toppling of the Puritan theocracy. He nearly managed it. A fuming Cotton Mather, minister of Boston’s Old North Church, dubbed Franklin and his writers the Hell-Fire Club and called his newspaper “A Wickedness never parallel’d any where upon the Face of the Earth!” Undeterred—and, more likely, spurred on—Franklin printed, in the pages of his paper, essay after essay about the freedom of the press. “To anathematize a Printer for publishing the different Opinions of Men,” the *Courant* argued, “is as injudicious as it is wicked.” For this, and much more, and especially for printing, about Mather, an “Essay against Hypocrites,” Franklin was tried for libel, and thrown in jail, twice.³²

Not long after Franklin started printing the *Courant*, he hired his little brother as an apprentice. In 1721, sixteen-year-old Benjamin Franklin broke upon the literary stage in the guise of a fictional character whose name was a parody of two of Cotton Mather’s more dreadful sermons, “Silentarius” and “Essays to Do Good”:

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I am courteous and affable, good humour'd (unless I am first provok'd,) and handsome, and sometimes witty, but always, Sir, Your Friend and Humble Servant, SILENCE DOGOOD.

As the sharp-tongued Widow Dogood, the well-drubbed Ben offered “a few gentle Reproofs on those who deserve them,” including Harvard students (the colony’s ministers-in-training), “Dunces and Blockheads,” whose blindness to their good fortune left the poor apprentice all but speechless. Young Franklin then did his caustic widow one better. He invented for her a priggish critic, “Ephraim Censorious,” who beseeched Mrs. Dogood to pardon young men their follies and save her scolding for the fair sex, since “Women are prime Causes of a great many Male Enormities.”³³ Ahem.

In 1723, a legislative committee charged with investigating James Franklin’s *Courant* reported, “The Tendency of the Said paper is to mock Religion, & bring it into Contempt, that the Holy Scriptures are therefore profanely abused, that the Reverend and faithful Ministers of the Gospel are injuriously Reflected on, His Majesty’s Government affronted, and the Peace and good Order of his Majesty’s Subjects of this Province disturbed.”³⁴ Authorities ordered James Franklin to stop printing the *Courant*. But no one said someone *else* couldn’t print it. A notice in the next issue claimed that the paper was “Printed and Sold by BENJAMIN FRANKLIN in Queen Street.” As the younger Franklin later fondly recalled, “I had the Management of the Paper, and I made bold to give our Rulers some Rubs in it.”³⁵

Nevertheless, Benjamin Franklin bridled at working for his brother. He ran away in 1723 and made his way to Philadelphia, where he began printing the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. His brother James died in 1735. By the 1760s, Boston’s most

spirited printer was a man named Benjamin Edes. In 1755, Edes, the son of a hatter from nearby Charlestown, took over the failing *Boston Gazette* with his lackluster partner, John Gill. Two years later, Boston's selectmen scolded Edes for his impiety: "you have printed Such Pamphlets & such things in your News Papers as reflect grossly upon the received religious principles of this People which is very Offensive. . . . we therefore now Inform you if you go on printing things of this Nature you must Expect no more favours from Us." Edes apologized, promising, in future, to "publish nothing that shall give any uneasiness to any Persons whatever." But he didn't stop. And with the passage of the Stamp Act, the *Boston Gazette* became the organ of the patriot opposition.³⁶

In August of 1765, a Boston mob attacked the houses of both the stamp collector, Andrew Oliver (Peter Oliver's brother), and of Thomas Hutchinson, setting loose, fluttering to the winds, the entire manuscript of Hutchinson's *History of Massachusetts*. "Mr. Hutchinson's History contains a valuable collection of facts," wrote Hutchinson's neighbor and close friend, Andrew Eliot, minister of Boston's New North Church, who rescued the pages from gutters and puddles.³⁷ Beneath an elm forever after known as the Liberty Tree, the crowd hanged Andrew Oliver in effigy and tacked to the effigy a paper purporting to be his confession:

Fair Freedom's glorious cause I meanly quitted,
betrayed my country for the sake of pelf,
But ah! at length the devil hath me outwitted,
instead of stamping others have hanged my self.

All over the colonies, protesters followed Boston's lead. One observer wrote in the *New York Gazette*, "Our Brethren in

Boston have endeared themselves more than ever to all the colonies in America.”³⁸

John Singleton Copley, for one, did not find the riots endearing. Copley was born in 1738 in a tobacconist’s shop on the Long Wharf. He taught himself to paint, from books, since, by his lights, there was no art in America, but he yearned to see the great galleries of Europe. In September of 1765, he shipped a portrait of his half brother, Henry Pelham, to London, complaining to the ship’s captain that the Stamp Act had made “much noise and confusion among us Americans.” Copley’s portrait, *Boy with a Squirrel*, shows his brother with a pet, tied to a delicate golden chain that dangles over a glass of water, a metaphor for the colonies’ attachment to the mother country, across the ocean.³⁹ Copley felt attached.

But that chain was already strained. Edes refused to buy stamps for his newspaper and, at John Adams’s suggestion, changed the *Gazette*’s motto to “A free press maintains the majesty of the people.”⁴⁰ “Working the political Engine,” is what Adams called writing for Edes, after a night spent at Edes’s shop, “Cooking up Paragraphs” for “the Next Days newspaper.”⁴¹ Paul Revere engraved Edes’s masthead. In 1765, Edes, Revere, Otis, Hancock, and the Adamses began calling themselves the Sons of Liberty. They met at a place called the Green Dragon Tavern.

The Green Dragon Tavern is also where the twenty-first-century Boston Tea Party held its monthly meetings. A site on Boston’s Freedom Trail, just a few steps from Faneuil Hall along the trail’s signature red brick path, the Green Dragon billed itself as the “Headquarters of the Revolution.” The original building, from 1712, was named after a Green

Dragon Tavern in London.⁴² By the front door, a painted statue of a redcoat, the Revolutionary equivalent of a tobacco store Indian, stood guard. The bartender called him Stanley because he stands outside. He brought him in every night. “Quartering the troops,” he said.

Christen Varley ran the meeting I went to at the Green Dragon Tavern on March 11, 2010. She was the Boston Tea Party’s president. Fierce, cheerful, and determined, Varley, thirty-nine, wore her brown hair in a ponytail, and she was fed up, fed up with the federal government, with taxes and the bailout, with the whole kit and caboodle. “Our topic tonight is that our wonderful federal government is trying to cram health care and whatnot down our throats,” she told an audience crowded around a long table in a dimly lit bar that could pass for the set of *Cheers* and where a dozen Tea Partiers sat cheek-by-jowl with almost as many reporters, photographers, television cameramen, and onlookers. Muskets decorated the walls. A Harvard political science graduate student wandered around, trawling for a paper topic. Austin Hess’s girlfriend, Kat Malone, was wearing his hat, along with a red, white, and blue T-shirt celebrating the day Scott Brown was elected:

1.19.10

We the People
HAVE SPOKEN.

Malone, who was from Charlestown, was an avid reader. She’d been working her way through biographies of the Founding Fathers. Beginning in the 1990s, there had been a great glut of these books in the nation’s bookstores. They were lively and stirring and, generally, hagiographic; their

stories were animated by heroes, larger than life, greater than the greatest generation, an inspiration, better men. Academic historians have criticized biographers for locating the explanation for events in character rather than, say, in larger historical forces, like ideas or politics or culture or economic and social conditions, an approach that has the effect of falsely collapsing the distance between now and then. That's part of the reason why, beginning in the 1960s, many academic historians began writing, instead, about ordinary people, people like artisans, shopkeepers, slaves, and printers.⁴³ But the charge had also been made that academic historians don't care enough about character or, for that matter, about plot, or storytelling, or writing for anyone other than other academic historians. The family feud between historians and biographers had been going on for long time, without really getting anywhere. (Even Mercy Otis Warren weighed in. For her, history required "a just knowledge of character.")⁴⁴ Meanwhile, people like to read books about famous people, the eighteenth-century Harvard-educated elite, like Hancock, the Adamses, Otis, Hutchinson, and the Oliveres. Malone had just finished reading a biography of Samuel Adams, and she had found it striking. "It's the same exact issues, all over again," she told me. "They didn't like that the British government was trying to take over their lives."

Doug Bennett, a graduate of Valley Forge Military College who was running for Boston City Council, was at the Green Dragon to court voters. He fumbled in his pockets and handed me a crumpled slip of paper. On it, he had penciled a stanza from Oliver Wendell Holmes's 1873 "Ballad of the Boston Tea-Party," which he recited, with feeling:

No! Ne'er was mingled such a draught
In palace, hall, or arbor,

As freeman brewed and tyrants quaffed,
That night in Boston Harbor!⁴⁵

I sat down next to George Egan, a soft-spoken Boston cop, retired and living on a pension. He told me he'd been a Democrat until "Kennedy killed that little girl" (1969, Teddy, Mary Jo Kopechne, Chappaquiddick) and had never worked on a political campaign until Brown's, but then he threw himself into it because "the government is out of control." Around the table, everyone was gabby and excited. There was much talk of voter guides, primaries, and the November elections and, in the nearer term, an activist training session run by the American Majority, where, Varley said, "we will learn how to be conservative activists and learn to do what the other people have been doing for the last forty years." She had an important announcement: the Tea Party Express would be bringing the former governor of Alaska and John McCain's erstwhile running mate, Sarah Palin, to Massachusetts on April 14, for a rally on the Boston Common, the day before the Tax Day protest on the Washington Mall. (The Tea Party Express was funded by a political action committee called Our Country Deserves Better, which was launched during the 2008 election, when it sponsored a "Stop Obama" bus tour.) Palin's visit, Varley said, was good news, "no matter what you think of her." She talked about the game plan for the big day: "The Obama Hitler sign. Let's look out for those people, and make sure people know, they're not us." Someone ventured that the problem was that too few people know that the "tea" in Tea Party is an acronym. Blank stares, all around. "Taxed Enough Already. People need to know that's what we stand for."

Edward Wagner, a middle-aged Republican from Jamaica Plain, agreed. "We need to disabuse the public of some of the

more exotic rumors out there.” Like everyone I met at the Green Dragon, Wagner was chatty, but he didn’t trust the press or, at least, he didn’t trust what the far right called the “lamestream media,” including the *Boston Globe*. “I saw people’s eyes start out of their heads on the twentieth,” Wagner said, talking about the day Brown was elected, “because they had read the *Globe* poll, and the funny thing is, they believed it, they believed the liberal media.” Austin Hess later told me, “I don’t read books; I read blogs.” I once asked Hess what he thought of Glenn Beck. (A 2010 New York Times / CBS News poll reported that “63 percent of self-described Tea Party supporters gain most of their television news from Fox, compared with 23 percent of all adult Americans.”)⁴⁶ “He’s given to hyperbole and he’s a bit emotional,” Hess said, “but, substantively, I haven’t yet found anything I disagree with him about.” Patrick Humphries, a software engineer from Bedford, a town out past Lexington, told me on another night that he got much of his news from the Drudge Report, which he read every day at lunch. “The media is filtered in this country,” Humphries said, but “the new media has made it so the old media can’t get away with it anymore.” The old media wasn’t just old. It was dying.

“It will affect Printers more than anybody,” Benjamin Franklin warned Parliament about the Stamp Act, a piece of legislation that turned out to be Britain’s first and arguably its worst mistake in trying to manage the American colonies (“Grenville’s greatest blunder,” Arthur Schlesinger Sr. once called it).⁴⁷ Printers, more than anybody, better than anybody, could fight back. When Massachusetts’ governor, Francis Bernard, who believed that Benjamin Edes’s *Boston Gazette* “swarmed with Libells of the most atrocious kind,” threatened Edes

and Gill with prosecution, John Adams urged the printers on. Do not, he told them, “suffer yourselves to be wheedled out of your liberty by any pretences of politeness, delicacy, or decency. These, as they are often used, are but three names for hypocrisy, chicanery, and cowardice.” Tories took to calling the *Gazette* the “Weekly Dung Barge.”⁴⁸ Edes, though, wasn’t easily wheedled out of anything. Ramsay, in his *History*, wrote, “It was fortunate for the liberties of America, that News-papers were the subject of a heavy stamp duty. Printers, when uninfluenced by government, have generally arranged themselves on the side of liberty, nor are they less remarkable for attention to the profits of their profession.”⁴⁹

The Stamp Act—the “fatal *Black-Act*,” one printer called it—was set to go into effect on November 1, 1765.⁵⁰ In October, colonists convened a Stamp Act Congress in New York, where delegates drafted and signed a declaration, asserting, above all, “that it is inseparably essential to the Freedom of a People, and the undoubted Right of *Englishmen*, that no Taxes be imposed on them but with their own consent, given personally, or by their Representatives.”⁵¹ On October 10, 1765, a Baltimore printer changed his newspaper’s title to the *Maryland Gazette, Expiring*. Its dread motto: “In Uncertain Hopes of a Resurrection to Life Again.” Later that month, the printer of the *Pennsylvania Journal* replaced his newspaper’s masthead with a death’s head and framed his front page with a thick black border in the shape of a gravestone. “Adieu, Adieu!” whispered the ghastly *Journal*. On October 31, the *New-Hampshire Gazette* appeared with black mourning borders and, in a column on the front page, lamented its own demise, groaning, “I must *Die!*” Shrieked the *Connecticut Courant*, quoting the book of Samuel: “Tell it not in Gath! Publish it not in Askalon!”⁵² The newspaper is dead!

Or, not quite dead yet. “Before I make my *Exit*,” gasped the *New-Hampshire Gazette*, “I will recount over the many good Deeds I have done, and how useful I have been, and still may be, provided my Life should be spar’d; or I might hereafter revive again.” The list of deeds was long and wonderful; it ran to four columns. Nothing good in the world had ever happened but that a printer set it in type. “Without this Art of communicating to the Public, how dull and melancholy must all the intelligent Part of Mankind appear?” It’s a fair question, before and since. But besides the settling over the land of a pall of melancholy and dullness, what else happens when a newspaper dies? In one allegory published during the Stamp Act crisis, a tearful *Liberty* cried to her dying brother, *Gazette*, “Unless thou revivest quickly, I shall also perish with thee! In our Lives we were not divided; in our Deaths we shall not be separated!”⁵³

The day the Stamp Act went into effect, Edes draped his *Gazette* in black mourning ink and Bostonians staged a Funeral for Liberty, burying a coffin six feet under the Liberty Tree. In his paper, Edes reported on similar funerals held all over the colonies. Everywhere, the story ended the same way. In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, “a coffin was prepared, and neatly ornamented, on the lid of which was inscribed the word *Liberty*, in capitals, aged one hundred and forty-five years, computing the time of our ancestors landing at Plymouth.” But then, lo, a reprieve, otherworldly: the eulogy “was scarcely ended before the corpse was taken up, it having been perceived that some remains of life were left.”⁵⁴

The old media, or what Edward Wagner called the “liberal media,” used to be known as the mainstream media, and its notions of fairness date to the eighteenth century. The elusive pursuit of journalistic objectivity only began in the nineteenth century, but the best eighteenth-century printers

had standards, too.⁵⁵ “The Business of Printing has chiefly to do with Men’s Opinions,” Benjamin Franklin wrote, in “An Apology for Printers,” in 1731. Printers were bound to offend, Franklin explained, but his conscience was clear so long as he published a sufficient range of opinion: “Printers are educated in the Belief, that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick; and that when Truth and Error have fair Play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter.”⁵⁶

In 2009, while the Tea Party was forming, the newspaper was dying, all over again. This was more than a coincidence; it was a cause. The decline of the newspaper had destabilized American politics. A website called the Newspaper Death Watch kept count, with a column titled “R.I.P.” One hundred and forty-five newspapers either stopped publishing a print edition or shut down entirely that year. Nearly six hundred newspapers laid off employees. On an average day in 2009, forty newspaper employees lost their jobs.⁵⁷ And this time around, there was no sign of a reprieve.

“These meetings are just fun because we do everything else by e-mail,” Christen Varley told me. Varley entered politics by way of the blogosphere. “I’m from Ohio,” she said. “Massachusetts is a foreign country to me.” She moved to Massachusetts in 2004, for her husband’s job, and, although, with the exception of an internship with the Ohio Republican Party in 1992, she’d never been involved in politics before, living in Taxachusetts triggered something in her. “I started blogging in 2006, and in early 2009 I just thought we should have a Tax Day thing.” Varley’s old blog is called GOPMom: “Mom Knows Best!” She organized Boston’s three Tea Party rallies in 2009: Tax Day, the Fourth of July, and 9/12. Her concerns included “the myth of anthropogenic global warming.”

Global warming she believed to be a conspiracy of the liberal media. She had been home raising her daughter, but in 2009 she took a job with the Coalition for Marriage and Family, a nonprofit formed to try to get a ban on same-sex marriage on the ballot. Its motto was “One Man, One Woman.” I asked her whether that didn’t amount to more government interference, but the problem, she said, was that the government had interfered so much already that it had nearly destroyed the family, and the only thing for it was to use the government to repair the damage.

All evening, people came and went and milled about. Varley stayed put. Behind her hung a huge framed print, depicting a group of patriots, drinking in this very tavern—something, stylistically, between a Currier and Ives engraving and the label on Sam Adams beer. That beer label happens to have been drawn by Jean Paul Tibbels, illustrator of the American Girl doll books. You’d figure the guy on Sam Adams beer must be Adams, who was, briefly, a brewer, but it’s not. It’s a cartoon of a portrait of Paul Revere, painted by Copley in 1768. Copley painted Revere, a silversmith, in a waistcoat and shirtsleeves, sitting at his bench, working. A couple of years later, he painted Adams, too, but as a bewigged and learned gentleman, in a buttoned frock, standing at a desk strewn with papers, not the sort of man to sell beer.

Varley was sitting, perfectly centered, in front of and just below that picture of the Sons of Liberty, which made it seem as if they were anointing her. That’s what had drawn all those photographers and television crews. I asked her what it meant to her that patriots had plotted here. “We admire their battle,” she said. “But we’re not melting down horseshoes for musket balls.”