

## **Road to Revolution**

Several pivotal events occurred which set the colonies on a course for revolution and emboldened colonists to declare their independence. The events that transpired irrevocably altered the lives of the individuals who lived through them, no matter which side of the cause they supported. In the following sections, we will explore how these events transpired in two different regions of colonial America, Boston and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, represented by *Mrs. George Watson* and *Young Moravian Girl*, respectively.

England found itself in a predicament in the aftermath of the **French and Indian War**. The high costs of war and maintaining continued military presence in North America had plunged the country into a staggering amount of debt. In an effort to raise money the English Parliament imposed a variety of taxes on the colonies, attempting to control the trade in and out of the region. These taxes angered the colonists, but perhaps none more so than the **Stamp Act of 1765**, which required that most printed material in the colonies be printed on specially stamped paper produced in Britain. The printed material, which had to be paid for in British currency, included newspapers, magazines and legal documents. In protest the colonists adopted a non-importation boycott of British-made goods in 1765, the same year Mrs. George Watson's portrait was painted.

Many women chose to wear dresses made of home-spun cloth instead of those made of imported textiles to show their support for the non-importation boycott and to protest British taxation. The abundance of luxurious imported silk fabric in Mrs. Watson's portrait supposes that her loyalties remained with Great Britain by flaunting costly imported goods and ignoring the non-importation boycott. While no record exists which reveals Mrs. Watson's personal inclinations, a woman's political loyalties were often dictated by those of her husband or her family. As both Mrs. Watson's husband and father were prominent, outspoken Loyalists, it can be inferred that her political allegiances, at least publicly, were the same.

Boston became increasingly dangerous as revolutionary activity intensified. Colonists were angry with Great Britain for the newly imposed taxes, and furious about the British soldiers sent to the colonies to make sure those taxes were enforced. Tensions over their presence erupted on the night of March 5, 1770, when a mob of unarmed colonists provoked a group of British soldiers standing guard outside the customs house, hurling insults and snowballs. As tensions rose, the British soldiers discharged their weapons, killing five men and wounding many others. This event would become known to history as the **Boston Massacre**.

This incident presents us with a direct example of the lives of Mrs. Watson and her family colliding with the events that led to revolution. The British soldiers involved in the incident were arrested and charged with manslaughter. The desire by Bostonians for an immediate trial was so intense that court was convened a week after the incident. One of the key players in the trial was a then-relatively unknown lawyer named **John Adams**. Although he sympathized with his fellow colonists, the future president agreed to defend the British soldiers. Several judges were tasked with presiding over the trial, one of whom was Elizabeth Watson's father, Peter Oliver. The role Oliver had to play



[The Bloody Massacre](#), original 1770, restrike 1970, Paul Revere, Smithsonian American Art Museum

in presiding over the fate of the British soldiers did not endear him to the people of Boston and the pressure to find the prisoners guilty was immense. Some of the judges even feared for their personal safety. Massachusetts **Governor Thomas Hutchinson** wrote in a letter at that time that he “found it difficult to prevail upon three of the judges to sit at the trial for fear of losing their popularity. . . . I have persuaded Judge Lynde, who came to town with his resignation in his pocket, to hold his position a little longer. . . . Judge Oliver appears to be firm, though threatened in yesterday's paper.” After almost three hours of deliberation, the jury sided with the defense and the soldiers were acquitted of murder.

After the trials, Governor Hutchinson was so pleased with Peter Oliver's work, that he appointed him Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court. Oliver's Loyalist connections and outspoken support for the Crown no doubt aided in his appointment; it was said that “[King] George III had no more able or zealous friends in America than the Olivers.” However, Oliver's good fortune did not last long, for once the public knew that part of his salary as Chief Justice was paid by the English crown, juries refused to serve under him and he was later impeached by the Massachusetts House of Representatives. His popularity and reputation quickly plummeted, coinciding with the outbreak of war. Fearing for his life, yet refusing to renounce his Loyalist sympathies, Oliver eventually fled to England in 1776. Years later he wrote a scathing, bitter account of the Patriots, their “rebellion,” and of his personal experiences during the war.

Loyalists like Peter Oliver and his son-in-law George Watson tended to have longstanding economic and social ties with British merchants and government officials. They were often intermarried with British families, creating stronger ties with England. Their very livelihoods depended on their good relationships with fellow merchants willing to trade with them across the Atlantic. As a result of these numerous interwoven connections, merchants like George Watson had everything to lose if they chose to side against England.

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Another Loyalist merchant with strong ties to England was Richard Clarke, Boston’s second largest importer of tea. Clarke also happened to be the father-in-law of John Singleton Copley, the artist who painted *Mrs. George Watson*, as well as Mrs. Watson’s maternal uncle. In 1773 the English Parliament passed the **Tea Act** in order to bolster the **East India Company**, which was drowning financially in a sea of surplus tea. The act gave the company a monopoly on all of the tea sold in the colonies, relieving them of export taxes on the tea while also asserting Parliament’s authority to tax its colonies. Realizing he could not compete with the monopoly on his own, Clarke, along with other Loyalists, bid on and won

a contract to receive a consignment of the company’s tea to import to the colonies. Colonists were outraged, believing that the duty on tea imposed by the **Townshend Acts** was an unconstitutional abuse of England’s power and that the tea consignees were just as culpable. Angry protesters mobbed the homes of Clarke and his family, including John Singleton Copley, demanding Clarke’s resignation as a consignee. Clarke initially refused, calling the group “chiefly . . . of the lowest rank.” Other demonstrators took matters into their own hands on the night of December 16, 1773, when they boarded ships in Boston Harbor loaded with the consignees’ newly imported tea and dumped 342 chests of tea into the water, an event later referred to as the **Boston Tea Party**. Of the event, John Adams would write that “This is the most magnificent Movement of all . . . There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity, in this last Effort of the Patriots, that I greatly admire. . . . The People should never rise without doing something to be remembered – something notable And striking. This Destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences, and so lasting, that I cant [*sic*] but consider it as an Epoquea in History.”

The loyalty of those who remained devoted to the Crown was recognized with positions of importance and a substantial income. George Watson’s loyalty was rewarded in August of 1774 when he was appointed by newly-installed British military governor, **General Thomas Gage** to

the prestigious Mandamus Council, an advisory body which was formed after the English Parliament had passed the **Massachusetts Government Act**. This act, one of the five **Intolerable Acts**, replaced the Massachusetts government charter of 1691 with a new restricted one, effectively stripping the colonists of self-governance. The act was intended to punish the colonists for their role in the Boston Tea Party. Elizabeth Watson's brother noted the appointment in his diary on August 23, 1774, "Well Col. Watson is sworn in to be one of His Majesties Council . . . The first Sunday [after his swearing in, the townspeople] passed him in the street without noticing him which occasions him to be very uneasy." That same day, after he had taken his seat in Church, his neighbors and friends "put on their hats before the congregation and walked out of the house. The extreme public indignity was more than he could bear. As they passed his pew, he hid his face by bending his head over his cane." Watson even received letters threatening to tar and feather him if he was ever seen in Boston.

The anger and disappointment of the townspeople was so strongly felt that George Watson was compelled to resign his position. Writing to General Gage a mere seven days after he was appointed, Watson explained,

*By my accepting of this Appointment, I find that I have rendered myself very obnoxious, not only to the Inhabitants of this place, but also to those of the neighboring Towns. On my Business as a Merchant I depend, for the support of myself and Family, and of this I must be intirely [sic] deprived, in short, I am reduced to the alternative of resigning my Seat at the Council Board, or quitting this, the place of my Nativity, which will be attended with the most fatal Consequences to myself, and family. Necessity therefore obliges me to ask Permission of your Excellency to resign my Seat at the Board, and I trust, that when your Excellency considers my Situation, I shall not be censured.*

George Watson's personal associations did little to quell the public's disapproval. One of these associations which created a particular firestorm was his friendship with artist John Singleton Copley. As the preeminent portrait painter to the wealthy in pre-Revolutionary War New England, Copley was sought after, by Loyalists in particular, for his adherence to English style and portraiture conventions. Additionally, Watson was connected to Copley through their shared political views and familial ties; Copley's wife Sukey was first cousins with Watson's wife, Elizabeth. Two years before Elizabeth Watson's death, her husband had commissioned this elegant portrait from Copley.

A visit from Watson to Copley's home in 1774 incurred the wrath of an angry mob. In a letter to his brother-in-law, Isaac Winslow Clarke, Copley described the incident:

*A number of persons came to the house, knock'd at the front door, and awoke Sukey and myself. . . . they asked me if Mr. Watson was in the house. . . . I told them he had been here, but he was gone . . . they than [sic] desired to know how I came to entertain such a Rogue and Villin [sic] . . . they said they could take no mans word, they believed he was here and if he was they would know it, and my blood would be on my own head if I had deceived them; or if I entertained him or any such Villain for the future . . . what if Mr. Watson had stayed (as I pressed him to) to spend the night. I must either have given up a friend to the insult of a Mob or had my house pulled down and perhaps my family murthered [sic].*

Other Loyalist families endured similar harassment; heckling crowds, damage to homes and property, and threatening letters. Mrs. Watson's own uncle, Andrew Oliver (1706-1774), was the Massachusetts official responsible for implementing the provisions of the Stamp Act. For this, his image was hanged in effigy by protestors, who later looted and destroyed his home. Fearing for his life, he asked to be relieved of his duties and publicly resigned underneath the **Liberty Tree**, the same tree from which he was hanged in effigy.

John Singleton Copley quickly realized that Boston was no longer safe for those who supported Britain. Two months after the incident involving Watson, Copley and his family, including his father-in-law Richard



[The Copley Family](#), 1776-77, John Singleton Copley, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art

Clarke, fled to London. There, the artist was well-received by British society. He soon joined the Royal Academy of Art and in 1785 was commissioned to paint a group portrait of the three youngest daughters of King George III. Copley would never again set foot in America. It has been estimated that approximately 80,000 Loyalists (of a total population of about 2.1 million) left America during the period of the Revolutionary War, with many fleeing to Britain and Canada.

## Glossary

**Boston Massacre:** a riot in Boston (March 5, 1770) arising from the resentment of Boston colonists toward British troops quartered in the city, in which the troops fired on the mob and killed several persons. Sometimes referred to as the Bloody Massacre.

**Boston Tea Party:** a political protest in which colonists opposed to the British imposed taxes on tea, took action and dumped chests of tea into Boston Harbor.

**East India Company:** (1600-1874) English trading company that pursued commercial trade of goods in the East Indies, China, India, and the land which today is part of modern Iran and Pakistan.

**French and Indian War:** (1756-1763) Also known as the Seven Years' War, a conflict over territory between English forces and combined French and American Indian forces in North America. England won the war, though the debt incurred from this war caused the escalation of tensions leading to the American Revolution.

**General Thomas Gage:** (1720-1787) British military general who was appointed military governor of Massachusetts in 1774. His orders were to implement the Intolerable Acts.

**Intolerable Acts:** Also known as the Coercive Acts; a series of British measures passed in 1774 and designed to punish the Massachusetts colonists for the Boston Tea Party.

**Liberty Tree:** Located in Boston during the Revolutionary War, the tree came to be a rallying point for those opposed to British tyranny in the colonies and most especially for the Sons of Liberty.

**Massachusetts Government Act:** An act of the British Parliament that gave military governor Gen. Thomas Gage absolute authority to repeal the Massachusetts colony's charter, effectively reducing colonial control over the government. The act gave Gage the power to appoint council members of his choosing, positions which had previously been filled by election.

**Stamp Act of 1765:** Law passed by the British Parliament on March 22, 1765; the first direct tax on the colonies, which required all American colonists to pay a tax on every piece of printed paper, which included items such as newspapers, legal documents, and playing cards.

**Tea Act:** (1773) an act of the British Parliament to primarily bolster the East India Company, but it had other objectives. First, the act aimed at reducing the large amount of surplus tea held by the East India Company. Second, it was intended to undercut the price of smuggled tea into the

colonies. Lastly, by having the colonists purchase the tea on which the Townshend duties were paid, the colonists would be implicitly agreeing to Parliament's right to tax them. Frustration with the Tea Act led to the Boston Tea Party.