THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT OF 1765-1776: THE SONS OF LIBERTY’S QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE AND THE FORMATION OF THE AMERICAN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

What can we learn about early manifestations of the American identity from a close analysis of organized resistance during the American Revolutionary movement of 1765-1776? How did the quest for independence embodied by the Sons of Liberty influence the formation of certain aspects of American core values and what continuities can be identified within American History?

A qualitative approach was utilized to investigate this research question and many secondary sources were consulted to get a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The secondary sources provided various viewpoints on the significance and role of the Sons of Liberty and their influence on the formation of the United States and its identity. Another component of this study were the primary sources from the period of 1765-1776 which were used to examine how the Sons of Liberty were portrayed as well as how the groups promoted themselves and their activities. The primary sources were comprised of newspaper articles and advertisements, handbills, broadsides, and music. The method of data analysis was interpretational as themes were identified related to the quest for independence and the development of the American identity. The findings have been communicated in an analytical narrative.
The value of this study can be found in its examination of the organized resistance movement present within the North American Colonies during 1765-1776 and the movement’s connection to the development of certain aspects of the American identity. In an attempt to provide a well-rounded analysis, the study was comprised of the following four sections: emergence of the organized resistance movement, the origins, membership, and presence of the movement, key figures in the cities of Boston and New York, and tactics employed by the Sons of Liberty. Each section contains both primary and secondary sources to support the evaluation of the Sons of Liberty and their influence on the Colonies’ quest for independence.

The organized resistance movement as embodied by the Sons of Liberty was able to develop a network of clubs and chapters throughout the North American Colonies and to unify Colonists in opposition to the Stamp Act. The intercolonial collaboration that occurred through the Sons of Liberty would serve as a model for resistance activities during the American Revolution. It was their quest for independence that led to the formation of the United States and the emergence of early manifestations of the American identity; an identity that valued participation in a representative system and an individual’s right to liberty.
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INTRODUCTION

There were several key factors that contributed to the strained relationship between Great Britain and its North American Colonies and ultimately led to the American Revolution, among them being Great Britain’s attempt to offset its significant debt from the French and Indian War by generating revenue through taxation of the Colonies and its attempt to impose remote rule and govern the Colonies’ from abroad. The rising tensions which existed between Great Britain and the Colonies manifested itself in the form of organized resistance among the Americans. The onset of the resistance coincided with the emergence of a national identity within the Colonies and a lack of recognition of the Colonies’ power on the part of Great Britain. As the American Revolution unfolded, it became apparent that Great Britain greatly underestimated the Colonies’ initial desire to return to the status quo of pre-1764 and their subsequent inclination for self-rule and their ability to defend and to protect what they perceived were their rights as citizens. One manifestation of organized resistance that contributed significantly to the revolutionary movement in the Colonies was through organizations known as the Sons of Liberty.

With the passage of the Revenue Act of 1764, Colonists began to question the relationship that existed between Great Britain and its North American Colonies. While the Revenue Act, also known as the Sugar Act, actually reduced the tax on molasses, it restricted colonial trade by limiting the distribution of colonial goods such as lumber to only Great Britain. In order to increase revenue, Great Britain placed emphasis on the
enforcement of the Revenue Act of 1764, a departure from its previous position of limited consequences for non-compliance. The system of prosecution as outlined in the Revenue Act was a concern for Colonists because cases could be heard in either the colonial courts or the Vice Admiralty courts, which where deemed “unfair” due to the presumption of guilt. While the implications of the Revenue Act were outwardly economic in nature, a perception that it violated the constitutional rights of the Colonists was beginning to gain recognition.

Another factor that contributed to the development of the organized resistance movement in the Colonies was Great Britain’s perception that the Colonies were “children” of the “mother country” and were to maintain a subordinate position despite their political and economic maturation. As noted by David F. Burg in The American Revolution An Eyewitness History, the French and Indian War “experience had generated some contempt among British commanders and troops for their American militia allies,” who were perceived as being an “undisciplined lot.” This contempt and sense of superiority on the part of the British generated a feeling of resentment within the Colonies and a desire for recognition and representation that was afforded to other citizens of Great Britain. The Colonies may have been guided by their individual interests, but “they shared a common opposition to the whole concept of taxation by a parliament 3,500 miles away in which they had no spokesman.”

Secondary Sources

The role of organized resistance during the American Revolutionary movement of 1765-1776 has been examined by several scholars including Pauline Maier, Michael
Pearson, Collin Bonwick, David F. Burg, and Robert Middlekauf. In her work, *From Resistance to Revolution Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776*, Pauline Maier examines American Colonists’ opposition to British rule and the political ideology that influenced the revolutionary movement that developed during 1765-1776. Maier is one of the leading historians in the field of the American Revolution and the book is based upon her doctoral dissertation completed under the guidance of Bernard Bailyn. In addition to its focus on colonial resistance during 1765-1776, her study includes an analysis of key figures from the movement in Colonies such as North Carolina, Virginia, New York, and Massachusetts, and an analysis of Whig theory and its impact on the American Revolution.

*Those Damned Rebels: The American Revolution as Seen Through British Eyes* by Michael Pearson provides a British perspective on the American Revolution and specifically how the British interpreted and reacted to opposition activities that occurred during 1774-1776. In order to do a well rounded analysis of the organized resistance movement and how it relates to the development of the United States as a free and independent nation, it is important to understand the historical context that led to the Revolution and its perceived impact and consequences on the British Empire.

In his work entitled, *The American Revolution*, Collin Bonwick contends that the internal revolution which occurred within the Colonies was just as significant in the development of the United States becoming a republican system as the Declaration of Independence and the War for Independence. Bonwick attempts to outline factors that
he considered to be at the center of the Revolution. The relevance of this study can be found in the author’s examination of the development of the republican system and the republican culture which includes several elements that are associated with the American core values of liberty and the right to self-rule.

*The American Revolution An Eyewitness History* by David F. Burg provides an overview of events that led up to the American Revolution and includes a number of first-hand accounts which provide the perspective of both the British and American military involved in the conflict. It is these accounts that will contribute a unique perspective of events related to the resistance movement. The book includes writings of the British forces who were attempting to put down the resistance and the American patriots inside and outside the military who were perpetrating acts of resistance.

In his narrative history of the American Revolution, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution 1763-1789*, Robert Middlekauff does a thorough examination of political life during this period and also includes several components of social history such as the anti-British protests and activities of the Sons of Liberty. Within *The Glorious Cause*, Middlekauff covers the events leading up to the Revolutionary War, the battles of the War itself, and profiles key figures in the resistance movement. The chapters which recount events related to the development of the independence movement and the ideology which was surfacing provide context for the onset of the War and the quest for independence.

Lastly, John C. Miller in the *Origins of the American Revolution* provides an overview of events and key figures in American History during the period of 1760-1776.
He explores several aspects of the American Revolution, such as the economic origins, an examination of the political issues, and a discussion of the ideological conflict. Miller’s work is relevant to an examination of the organized resistance movement because the author attempts to unravel the “radical alteration in the American mind” that resulted in the Colonies’ quest for independence. He contends that the Revolution represented America’s break not only from Great Britain, but its break also from Europe and how the ideals of the revolution continued to impact American history for centuries.

**Primary Sources**

In addition to these secondary sources, there are a number of primary sources from the period 1765-1776 that provide insight into how the Sons of Liberty were portrayed as well as how the groups promoted themselves and their activities. The primary sources include newspaper articles and advertisements, handbills, broadsides, and music. Primary sources such as these also reveal how a national identity was being shaped by the Colonists’ resistance activities. Quotations taken from these primary sources include the original font utilized during the eighteenth century.

A number of broadsides from the period of 1765-1776 can be attributed to groups known as the Sons of Liberty and one such primary source was published in New York City on July 7, 1769. This broadside served as a call to action issued by the United Sons of Liberty and requested that people support the Non-Importation Agreement in order to get the tax on paper, glass, etc. repealed. The broadside presents seven resolutions regarding specific ways that Colonists could support the Non-Importation Agreement and could convey a united community interested in preserving liberties and generating
opposition to the Revenue Act. Another document from this period was published on November 29, 1773, and lists a series of five resolutions put forth by the Sons of Liberty of New York regarding the need to boycott tea in order to curtail Britain’s ability to generate revenue from the Colonies.

In addition to broadsides that outlined activities of and resolutions passed by the local Sons of Liberty, groups would also use this form of communication to advertise meetings, publicize membership lists, and issue directives either as a warning to deter opposition to their activities or as a tool to mobilize support. An example of a broadside that advertised an upcoming meeting was published on December 16, 1773, in New York and outlined the meeting date and location. The advertisement purposefully appealed to residents’ desire to protect their liberties and their business investments. A warning to those residents who did not provide support to the Non-Importation Agreement was published via a broadside in Boston in 1768 and was attributed to the local Sons of Liberty.

While there are many documents that were published for public consumption during 1765-1776 that pertain to the Sons of Liberty, personal accounts of individuals involved in or affected by the activities of the Sons of Liberty will also be incorporated into this study. Writings by key figures of the organized resistance movement such as Samuel Adams, John Morin Scott, and John Hancock will provide personal accounts from the times. Correspondence written by these and other individuals involved in the movement demonstrate their use of motivational rhetoric and disclose their strategic approach to generate opposition to duties placed on various goods and documents. The
writings of individuals opposed to the resistance movement offer an alternative perspective on the activities of the Sons of Liberty and will be considered as well.

Newspapers of the period are another good source from which to gather opinions and specific political perspectives on activities of the Sons of Liberty. Other items such as songs, satirical poems, and drawings present insight into how the Sons of Liberty and the organized resistance movement were portrayed in various communities. These items were used both as propaganda to generate support for the revolutionary movement and as criticism to belittle the movement.

Despite a breadth of literature on the social, economic, and political causes of the American Revolution and several works related to the Sons of Liberty, few historians have explored whether a connection exists between the organized resistance movement as embodied by the Sons of Liberty and early manifestations of the American identity. If we understood how the quest for independence influenced the development of certain aspects of the American identity, we would better understand the American core values of liberty and democracy that shape the tenets of our society.
CHAPTER 1
EMERGENCE OF THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

The rising tension between Great Britain and its Colonies in North America can be attributed to several developments that occurred between 1764 and 1776. Several Acts of Parliament, specifically the Revenue Act of 1764 and the Stamp Act of 1765, were implemented to generate revenue from the Colonies and to regulate trade relationships in order to assist Great Britain with offsetting its debts incurred from the French and Indian War. Another development that created tension between Great Britain and its Colonies was Great Britain’s attempt to impose remote rule and govern the Colonies from abroad. While the Colonies in North America had always been considered subjects of the Crown, they had previously been granted greater flexibility and had developed a false sense of autonomy. When Great Britain began to impose revenue-generating and regulatory Acts, rumblings of resistance began to appear within the Colonies.

Enactment and Enforcement of Parliamentary Acts

On April 5, 1764, Parliament passed the Revenue Act of 1764, deemed the Sugar Act by Colonists, which imposed tariffs on sugar, wine, and coffee, in addition to other goods imported for the American market.\(^1\) The tariff imposed upon molasses was actually reduced “from six pence to three pence per gallon” by the Sugar Act, but Colonists had historically utilized smuggling and bribery to avoid paying the original tax.\(^2\) The Sugar Act had provisions for enhanced enforcement, thus reducing the
amount of corruption and tax evasion that had been a key component of trade. The Sugar Act also restricted the distribution of colonial products such as lumber so that they could only be sold to Great Britain.³

Through enactment of the Sugar Act, Great Britain attempted to generate revenue from the Colonies as a result of its dominate position and to impose greater enforcement of British policies upon the Colonies, which did not have representation in Parliament. While “residents of Great Britain largely accepted increased taxes as customary,” American Colonists had not been subjected to direct taxation or an infringement upon their trade capabilities.⁴ Colonists especially resented the new enforcement measures imposed by the Sugar Act, which moved trials related to the tariff infractions from the more indulgent colonial courts to the Vice-Admiralty courts, known to have been more strict in their interpretation of the laws and consistently imposed harsher penalties.⁵

The Revenue Act of 1764 was proposed by George Grenville, who was known to be “a man of business, stiff, opinionated, and dour” and who possessed a “zeal for thrift and economy.”⁶ Due to these characteristics and his capacity as head of the Treasury and First Minister, Grenville was greatly concerned that the financial stability of Great Britain was in jeopardy because of its significant burden of debt following the Seven Years War. Recognizing that smuggling was commonplace and resulted in a significant loss of revenue for Great Britain, when the Molasses Act expired in 1763, Grenville proposed the Sugar Act which entailed greater enforcement in an attempt to regulate colonial customs activity.⁷ Smuggling was perpetrated to such a degree that it
represented a loss of revenue for British merchants, manufacturers, and the government estimated at the equivalent of 700,000 British pounds of merchandise annually.\textsuperscript{8}

The amount of bureaucracy created by the new custom regulations was perceived to be an inconvenience by American smugglers, but it was not a hindrance to their activities, rather it was the utilization of the Royal Navy to enforce the regulations that posed the greatest impediment.\textsuperscript{9} The required certificates, affidavits, and bonds were a manageable annoyance to American smugglers, but having to face prosecution in the Vice Admiralty courts was a significant deterrent. The Vice Admiralty courts were presided over by a judge and not by a jury of peers, resulting in fewer leniencies and often entailing the seizure of property.

Another component of Grenville’s regulations was to impose trade restrictions on the importation and exportation of raw materials to the Colonies. By declaring that raw materials such as lumber could only be exported to Great Britain and its Colonies, American farmers lost access to outside markets and suffered a reduction in prices and thus revenue. This reduction of revenue in combination with higher duties on imported merchandise created a financial hardship for American farmers and merchants.\textsuperscript{10} According to Miller in his work, \textit{Origins of the American Revolution}, “the suppression of colonial smuggling and the tightening of the mercantilist system, however, did little to ease the financial burdens of the mother country.”\textsuperscript{11}

The impact of the trade restrictions not only affected the livelihood of farmers who produced raw materials, it also had implications on the triangular trade system between the New England Colonies, African countries on the Atlantic, and the foreign
West Indies. The production and distribution of rum was one of the primary ways that Colonies of New England were able to acquire specie. Prior to the trade restrictions, Colonists would purchase molasses from the foreign West Indies, manufacturer it into rum, and then sell it to Americans, Indians, and foreign residents.

Within the triangular trade system, rum was the commodity that New England traders would utilize to purchase African slaves that they could then sell to plantation owners in the foreign West Indies in exchange for specie or more molasses. The specie was valuable because it could be utilized to purchase British manufactured goods imported into the Colonies. Traders who were paid in molasses could then send it to distilleries in New England where it would be manufactured into rum, and in turn be taken to African countries to purchase more slaves. In addition to their distribution of rum, Colonists supplied flour, horses, and lumber to the foreign West Indies in exchange for specie, these activities were also discontinued by the trade restrictions. By restricting the Colonies’ trade to only the British West Indies, Grenville forced Colonists to trade with their “worst enemies” and “threatened the economic foundation” of American farmers and manufacturers.

When considering these factors that contributed to the emergence of a resistance movement within the Colonies, it should be noted that Grenville also imposed new taxes within Britain on malt and cider. These excise taxes were met with strong opposition especially in the countryside, and it was due to violence that the cider tax was repealed in 1765. The violence that was perpetrated by “mobs of countrymen” against excise officers was to foreshadow Colonial resistance. Just as the Sons of Liberty were
focused on generating resistance against Great Britain for imposing stamp duties upon the Colonies, which did not have representation in Parliament, the mobs that protested the cider tax “believed themselves to be defending the rights of Englishmen.”

In the northern New England Colonies, the Sugar Act was widely perceived as a revenue-generating tactic utilized by Grenville and merchants united in opposition. A Correspondence Committee was formed in Boston by merchants who wanted to “promote a union and coalition of their councils.” It was Samuel Adams who led an initiative to unite Americans against the Sugar Act and went so far as to “warn the British government in the newspapers that New Englanders would forcibly resist the act.” While the Sugar Act created unrest among the merchants of New England, it was the Stamp Act that followed which prompted the organization of the Sons of Liberty.

In another attempt to generate revenue from the Colonies, Grenville proposed the Stamp Act in March 1765. Work to develop the legislation actually began in the fall of 1764 when Thomas Whately, Secretary to the Treasury, was asked by Lord Grenville to research and draft regulation requiring that official documents be prepared on specially stamped paper that would carry a tax. In an effort to learn about colonial life so as to create regulations that were applicable, Whately contacted departments, officials, and prominent citizens to gather feedback on the development of the tax. Overtures by Whately were not the first time that colonial agents had heard of Grenville’s idea of a stamp tax as he had suggested previously that the Colonies would be expected to offset the cost of their defense through a vehicle of taxation.
In February 1765, colonial agents met with Grenville again to discuss the proposed regulations and voice their concern regarding the taxation of the Colonies.\textsuperscript{25} The agents emphasized that “Americans preferred to tax themselves” and that “a tax by Parliament would subvert representative government in America.”\textsuperscript{26} Grenville was not deterred by their resistance and proceeded to introduce the Act to Parliament in March 1765. Not only was Grenville a strong believer in Parliament’s authority to tax the Colonies, he also anticipated that he could “raise 60,000 pounds per year that would defray costs of defending the Colonies.”\textsuperscript{27}

When examining the organized resistance movement which developed in response to the Stamp Act of 1765, it is important to consider prevailing attitudes of the time. During Whately’s investigation to assess American attitudes toward a tax, he interviewed Jared Ingersoll of Connecticut, who provided a frank and direct response outlining potential origins of resistance.\textsuperscript{28} Ingersoll indicated that Americans “are filled with the most dreadful apprehensions” of such a tax and that Colonists would find many ways “to avoid the payment of a tax laid upon a country without the Consent of the Legislature of that Country and in the opinion of most people Contrary to the foundation principles of their natural and Constitutional rights and Liberties.”\textsuperscript{29}

Despite the concern and opposition voiced by colonial agents and private citizens, Grenville proceeded with introducing the Stamp Act for consideration by Parliament. On March 22, 1765, Parliament passed the Stamp Act which imposed “a tax on all legal documents, licenses, newspapers, almanacs, pamphlets, playing cards, and dice, requiring that they bear stamps to prove that the tax has been paid.”\textsuperscript{30} The Act
would take effect on November 1 of that year and Americans were to be appointed as tax masters. Before the Act received approval from Parliament, there was debate among members regarding the taxation of the Colonies and their opposition on the grounds that it violated their constitutional rights. There did not appear to be a great deal of sympathy for the Colonists’ position because it was noted that “anger against the Colonists for presuming to challenge Parliament’s absolute sovereignty was so widespread that opponents to the proposed tax phrased their arguments very carefully.”

It was during the debate of Stamp Act that Colonel Isaac Barre in response to a comment made by Charles Townsend, used the term “Sons of Liberty” when referring to the American Colonists and the struggles they had endured as British subjects. His remarks included admiration for the Colonists’ perseverance and endurance when faced with difficulties, such as confrontations with Native Americans and harsh living conditions. He also noted that the Great Britain had treated the Colonies with “neglect” and at times had utilized manipulation so as to gain a beneficial position or outcome for Britain. Barre’s “explosive” defense of the colonial opposition did little in terms of persuading Grenville or the House of Commons to not support the Stamp Act. The Act received final approval from the King and when word reached the Colonies in mid-April, it resulted in the emergence of an organized resistance movement that had a presence in all thirteen Colonies. The resistance would take several forms and escalate in scope and consequence.
Resistance as a Concept

The resistance that would emerge in the Colonies in reaction to the Stamp Act was initially based upon a desire to rectify what was perceived to be an infringement upon their rights as British subjects. While it would develop into a movement calling for separation and ultimately independence, at the onset it was focused upon seeking recognition that taxation should be levied by the Colonists or their representatives, rather than Parliament. In From Resistance to Revolution, Pauline Maier notes that the colonial “response was deliberately related to political disillusionment,” and not a desire to necessarily separate from Britain.36

The organized resistance orchestrated by the Sons of Liberty was not necessarily without precedent, as it should be evaluated “against the background of English revolutionary tradition,” according to Maier.37 While the Sons of Liberty may have become recognizable due to their efforts at propaganda, the ideology at the basis of their movement echoes some of the principles that influenced other movements in English history. The mentality or ideology of the Colonists was certainly significant in generating support for the resistance movement, but it was not the only factor that led to an uptake among Colonists. A certain practicality was also present within colonial life and “other factors – economic or political interests, family ties, religious affiliation, temperament and psychology – were crucial to the political destinations of individual Colonists.”38

When examining the resistance movement mobilized by the Sons of Liberty, it is important to note that it exhibited certain characteristics that contributed to its
effectiveness. One aspect was the desire to maintain order and the recognition that “unrestrained popular violence was counterproductive.” While the Sons of Liberty were perceived to be driven by a mob mentality, their impact was based upon the threat of violence and for the threat to be effective, the violence needed to be controlled, rather than unpredictable. Senseless violence would actually dilute the significance of the movement and would detract from their focus of having the Stamp Act repealed. It was because of these reasons that the colonial leaders “organized resistance in part to contain disorder.”

Maier contends that organized resistance contributed to the popularity of self-rule and the utilization of “social compacts.” The organization and constructive utilization of mass movements towards achieving an identified goal, such as the repeal of the Stamp Act, supported the concept of an intercolonial collaboration. By becoming what could be perceived as a “social force” rather than an undisciplined, unpredictable, emotional mob, the organized resistance movement gained in recognition and historical significance.

While the organized resistance movement promoted disciplined opposition, there were also other types of protest that existed during this period. Some of those protests were in the form of vandalism, spontaneous violence, and activities of minority interest groups. These other types of resistance lacked the organization of the Sons of Liberty and were often perpetrated spontaneously and for immediate gratification. A lack of organization did not make them ineffective overall, rather it allowed them to keep a local perspective and focus on the needs of their community.
organized resistance movement was able to develop a network throughout the Colonies in opposition to the Stamp Act, resistance conducted at the local level occurred in order to respond to perceived injustices affecting an immediate community, such as neighbors, friends, and family.\(^{45}\)

One characteristic of these forms of resistance was the role of the local magistrate. Within “prominent colonial incidents,” it was not uncommon “for local magistrates to participate or openly sympathize with the insurgents.”\(^{46}\) Part of this involvement can be attributed to the closeness of magistrates to their communities as well as the reality that legal authority would come from London and would be in opposition to local interest.\(^{47}\) This did not happen in all cases, but when imperial efforts conflicted with local interest, magistrates were known to side with their local community.\(^{48}\) However, when magistrates or individuals who were representatives of British rule, such as tax collectors or custom enforcement officers, were perceived to not be sympathetic to local interest or not concerned with the welfare of the community, they would often be the target of retaliation by the Sons of the Liberty or other resistance groups.

In addition to the role of the magistrate, organized resistance within the American Colonies during the eighteenth century was characterized by other traits, such as the timing of when uprisings would occur, the impetus for incidents, and the context of civil authority during this period. Resistance to legal edicts or regulatory restrictions was known to occur in several forms including spontaneous, informal activities and more calculated, disciplined protests, yet both forms “occurred only after the normal
channels of redress had proven inadequate.” 49 Individuals and groups would resort to resistance activities or protests if they felt as though there were no other avenues for resolving the conflict or for having their position taken into consideration.

While the American Revolution which led to independence from Great Britain was characterized by several key elements that have been identified as uniquely American, resistance activities taking place in the Colonies shared commonalities with uprisings in Great Britain. 50 Those similarities included a resistance to regulatory acts that significantly impacted the financial livelihood of a city or town, such as customs enforcement in a port city. 51 Also, a perceived infringement of liberties whether it was related to property rights or representation within government activities and a perceived threat to personal freedom, such as through impressments, would become a cause for protests in either Great Britain or the American Colonies. While these characteristics may be similar, acts of colonial resistance “were distinct from those of Englishmen only in that they took on a new gravity, for in the Colonies the abuses of British officials were those of an external power.” 52

The role of civil authority during the eighteenth century was minimal as during this time period, law enforcement and professional police did not really exist. 53 There might have been a sheriff, but mostly the government and its officials relied on “hue and cry” which would enlist “able body men to help the sheriff.” 54 This type of enforcement could be lacking in presence especially when the protest was comprised of a majority of the community and those men who were not involved in the protest did not have an interest in aligning with the governmental authority. The militia could also be called
upon, but “these kinds of law enforcement mechanisms left magistrates virtually helpless whenever a large segment of the population was immediately involved in the disorder.”

The Influence of Ideology

The organized resistance movement during the American Revolution was based upon an ideology that was influenced by several political theorists including John Locke and Thomas Paine and the ideals of the Enlightenment Period generally. The American Revolution was not only a political event in terms of seeking independence from Great Britain, but it was also an intellectual event and represented a shift in ideology that had been growing during the pre-war period and would continue through the ratification of the Constitution. The formation of the United States was a result of actual events and was based upon a set of ideas that promoted a republican or representative governance structure rather than a reliance on bloodlines or a monarchy for structure.

The theories of John Locke fed into a political liberalism that called for minimal government and was libertarian in nature, espousing a sensibility that made people protective of their rights. Within his Second Treatise on Government, Locke contends that not all government is derived from violence and force, but that there are other forms of political power. The chapter, “Civil Government,” stipulates that political power is the right to make laws that carry consequences to regulate and preserve property with enforcement by the people for the common good.

The state of nature as identified by Locke lends itself to a condition of perfect freedom and pure benevolence. He believed that men were naturally in a state of nature until they took themselves out of it, which is in opposition to others who believed
that “there were never any men in the state of nature.” It was his contention that this state of perfect freedom gave men the ability “to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit.” Locke believed that men living according to reason would have no limits and no bounds to what they could accomplish, yet liberty was not a license to perpetrate crimes against society. The parameters of liberty did not include the ability of man to “destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession,” according to Locke. He did concede that not everyone would follow the laws of society making government a necessary evil to protect people and also protect property. Property crimes were a threat to the system and would result in stiff penalties. He was also a proponent of equality and believed that all men were born free and were fundamentally malleable and possessed reason. His idea that all men were equal and independent, and that “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions” resonated with American Colonists, who were growing disgruntled with Great Britain imposing remote rule and enacting taxes that affected their property.

Critics of Locke accused him of being naïve about human nature, which he regarded as reasonable and benevolent, and dismissed his idea of a social contract as being unfounded. While Colonists did agree with his belief that man became a political entity though property, a dark side of property existed, such as acquiring land at the expense of Native Americans who were forced to relocate. Locke believed that property was acquired through labor and that the use of labor would take the property out of its state of nature and it could be appropriated. It was his contention that an individual should limit his acquisition to only the amount of land that he could use and
needed so as to not waste resources. Locke’s thoughts on property came from a position of faith that God “gave the world in common to all mankind” and that it was given for “the use of the industrious and rational.” It was the unregulated, free market system that would emerge over the following century and whose unintended consequences would trample on the rights of poor people.

Locke’s ideas of liberty and freedom had a significant influence on leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson and George Mason, who were instrumental in the American Revolution and the development of the Declaration of Independence. The concept of a moral philosophy based upon reason had tremendous appeal to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was known to be a strong proponent of the rule of reason and he agreed with Locke’s idea that “the freedom then of man, and liberty of acting according to his own will, is grounded on his having reason, which is able to instruct him in that law he is to govern himself by, and make him know how far he is left to the freedom of his own will.”

Another individual that was influential on the resistance movement was the pamphleteer, Thomas Paine, who drafted *Common Sense* in 1776. Thomas Paine had been raised as a Quaker, was known as a rationalist, and had a way of writing that appealed to the common man. He had tried a variety of professions including storekeeper, customs inspector, and schoolteacher before becoming a journalist. His 79 page pamphlet, *Common Sense*, sold more than 150,000 copies and with it, “he wanted to persuade his readers of their human rights and democratic equality, and he wanted them to abandon the discredited ideas of hereditary rule, rank, and privilege.”
Paine’s writing became a justification for a separation from Great Britain and represented a new approach that would develop into a sense of American nationalism. He was almost religious in his zeal and his writings were influential because they were able to mobilize people and encouraged Colonists to distance themselves from Europe and to go against the spiritual monarchy.  

While the literacy rate was increasing in the Colonies, Paine’s conversational style was able to convey in an informal manner the benefits of self-government and what needed to be done to accomplish it and subsequently permanent separation. Paine continued to maintain a writing style that was accessible and appealed to the common man, even though he “traveled from then on in the highest intellectual and social circles in America, England, and France.” Paine was known to have been assisted by Benjamin Franklin, Dr. Benjamin Rush, David Rittenhouse, and Samuel Adams when drafting *Common Sense.*

Paine was criticized for his fiery call for independence, which was different from other American leaders who were still interested in working towards reconciliation with Great Britain. John Adams was particularly harsh in his criticism of *Common Sense* as he remarked that it “will do more Mischief” and that Paine was a “keen Writer but very ignorant of the Science of Government.” Other critics called Paine’s writing “inflammatory” and were noted as having “despised Paine because he disputed the English Constitution.”

Much of Thomas Paine’s argument for independence was based upon tenets of the Enlightenment and it was he who identified “the eighteenth century Enlightenment
as the Age of Reason.”  There were distinct phases of the Enlightenment and it was the progressive American leaders who embraced the most practical aspects of it. Thomas Jefferson, who was among the American leaders that praised Thomas Paine and his pamphlet, *Common Sense*, and who was instrumental in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment. The moderate phase of the Enlightenment, which emphasized the need to focus on the rational aspects of the universe, was attractive to Jefferson because he was a strong proponent of the value of reason and the use of data. The Enlightenment was characterized by ideals that the universe was governed by a system of laws and that these laws govern all aspects of life; it is through reason that it is possible to figure out how to classify and organize information into patterns.

Historian Henry F. May has identified five chronological phases of the Enlightenment, the third of which he calls the Revolutionary Phase. The ideas that typify this phase had a significant influence on Thomas Jefferson and the other American leaders who were dissatisfied with the relationship between Great Britain and its Colonies. The Revolutionary phase was focused on the recognition that a perfect society was based upon reason, rather than religious or divine right of rule.

In addition to key political figures such as John Locke and Thomas Paine and the tenets of the Enlightenment period, the emergence of the resistance movement during the American Revolution was also influenced by the ideology that motivated the Glorious Revolution. The Glorious Revolution began in 1680 and was focused on the ideals of equality and property and John Locke was a key figure of it. The ideals of the Glorious
Revolution were very similar to the philosophy of the Whig party which had orchestrated change in Great Britain a century before. The Glorious Revolution accomplished its goals without bloodshed or violence and was characterized by its focus on reform and promotion of Parliament over the monarchy. This revolution was characterized by the preservation of a limited constitutional monarchy and many of the ideas would re-surface during the American Revolution and the resistance movement.

Three ideas that were both part of the Whig ideology and the movement towards independence for the American Colonies was that tolerance would make individual Colonies stronger rather than weaker, that all are equal in the eyes of God, and that all men are capable of reason. It was John Locke who publicized the vocabulary of revolution such as liberty, freedom, and the spirit of democratic rule. The Declaration of Independence would be shaped and contain many of these principles such as the right “to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The emergence of the resistance movement during the American Revolution can be attributed to a number of factors. These factors include both specific events and a shift in political ideology that culminated in the mobilization of the Colonists to no longer seek reconciliation with Great Britain, but rather to pursue independence. When examining the impact of organized resistance on the American Revolution and the development of the American identity, it is important to consider the context during which these activities were taking place and the political climate during which these radical theories were being debated and adopted. The Friends of Liberty, such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, promoted the Colonists’ right to liberty and the
call for a representative system that could not be attained while under the auspices of British rule.

The events that contributed to the development of the organized resistance movement were the enactment of several Parliamentary Acts aimed at both economic gain for Great Britain as well as imposing a more commanding presence over the Colonies’ trade practices and local governance. The Sugar Act and the Stamp Act are examples of how Great Britain attempted to generate revenue from the Colonies while imposing stricter enforcement of regulations. The enforcement of trade regulations not only generated an economic hardship on merchants, farmers, and traders, but it also significantly impacted the triangular trade system that had allowed the Colonies to gain access to specie.

The organized resistance movement as embodied by the Sons of Liberty possessed several characteristics of other forms of resistance, similar to revolutionary traditions in England. Similarities included the importance of disciplined resistance, the idea of forming a social compact that benefited the whole community, the role of local magistrate, the impetus for protests, and the minimal role of civil authority during this time period. These characteristics will prove significant when examining the origins and structure of the Sons of Liberty as the group is portrayed as radical and unprecedented, yet it is actually formed upon the concept of mass movements and resistance.

The emergence of the Sons of Liberty and their impact on the American Revolution and the development of the American identity were also influenced by the ideology of several key figures and periods in history. John Locke was known to
promote the role of reason and limited government, the right of revolution, and the significance of property. Thomas Paine recognized the role of reason and issued a call to action that ignited a spark that “got rebel men and muskets into the field.”

Tenets of the Enlightenment period were utilized to develop the foundation of the Declaration of Independence and subsequently, the American values of liberty and democracy. The deistic emphasis on reason and the rationality of the universe was a marked contrast to the belief of religious or divine right of rule. These ideals were also present during the Glorious Revolution which focused on equality and the right to property that contributed to the development of a mercantile system. The Glorious Revolution moved England towards a more limited constitutional monarchy and promoted the role of Parliament or the role of self-government. These ideals of equality and self-rule are also present within the framework of the Declaration of Independence and the American identity.

The emergence of the organized resistance movement was influenced by specific events, the political climate, and the political theorists of the time. The causes that led to the formation of the Sons of Liberty will also contribute to the group’s structure, membership, and presence within the Colonies. These characteristics and the group’s quest for independence influenced the development of certain aspects of the American identity, and the core values of liberty and democracy.
CHAPTER 2
ORIGINS, MEMBERSHIP, AND PRESENCE

When examining the impact of the Sons of Liberty on the development of certain aspects of the American identity, it is important to understand where the organized resistance movement began within the North American Colonies and how the movement was able to spread from one Colony to another. While these factors are significant, it is essential to also understand why the Sons of Liberty appealed to Colonists, thus allowing its membership to expand and broaden its base of support. It was this broad base of support that contributed to the organized resistance movement being present throughout the Colonies and resulted in a collaborative effort to oppose taxation acts imposed by Great Britain. Although the various Sons of Liberty chapters were autonomous in their leadership and activities at the local level, it was their strength as a united body that posed the greatest threat to British rule and regulations.

While the size and fervor of the local Sons of Liberty may have varied from place to place, there were common indicators of its presence, such as advertisements in newspapers, posted broadsides, and distributed handbills recounting the activities of the Sons of Liberty. It was not unusual to find a meeting notice and resolutions passed by the local Sons of Liberty displayed prominently near or on the Liberty Tree or Pole of that city or town. The Liberty Tree would come to symbolize the Colonists’ fight to be free from tyranny and their resistance to the remote rule of Great Britain. In many cities
and towns the Liberty Tree was known as a gathering place for the local Sons of Liberty and those residents who supported activities to defend the Colonists’ right to self-rule.

In addition to the Liberty Tree, taverns or inns would often serve as a meeting place for the Sons of Liberty. During this period of the eighteenth century, it was not uncommon for each town or city to have at least one tavern and it would often be recognized as the center of the social community. It is not surprising that various revolutionary organizations, such as the Sons of Liberty, would utilize taverns for meetings as taverns provided a venue where men from various class levels could meet and discuss politics, business matters, and local government issues. Tavern owners were often sympathetic to revolutionary organizations because they too wanted to protect their commercial interests and that of their customers from infringement by Great Britain and its policies of taxation.

Although the Sons of Liberty were prominent during the 1765-1776, there were other revolutionary organizations that contributed to the resistance movement and its influence on the American Revolution and early manifestations of the American identity. For example, the Daughters of Liberty were able to express their dissatisfaction with the Tea Act by refusing to purchase British goods. While it was not socially acceptable for women during this time period to engage in mass violence, drawings and paintings from this period do depict women being involved in protests and mob riots in cities such as Boston and New York.
Origins of the Organized Resistance Movement

The organized resistance group known as the Sons of Liberty were “clubs of patriots” that took their name from Colonel Barre’s speech in the House of Commons on February 6, 1765, according to John C. Miller in his work, *Origins of the American Revolution*. Colonel Isaac Barre was reported to have made his speech in Parliament in response to the proposed Stamp Act, and within that speech, he referred to the Colonists as “those Sons of Liberty.” Barre’s reply was meant to defend the Colonies’ resistance to the Stamp Act, but as Middlekauf notes, it may have “stiffened Parliament’s resolve to tax.”

These “activist groups” were formed in each colony by “progressives” who engaged Colonists around the idea of patriotism in order to generate opposition to what was perceived as imperial tyranny. Organizers used the “emotive name the Sons of Liberty and set up committees to coordinate activities.” The Sons of Liberty played upon the building resentment towards Britain’s policies that conveyed a sense that the Colonies needed to be “watched over, tended, managed, disciplined, and made to obey if recalcitrant.”

While resistance leaders played upon growing resentment towards Britain and its policies, the title, Sons of Liberty, was also easily adopted during this period of the eighteenth century due to its connotations of American men being “born-free” and recognized as “heirs of free institutions hard-won by their father in England and America.” In addition, men who had been associated with fraternal organizations would likely be comfortable with the term “sons of.” The prefix conveys a familial sense of
belonging, loyalty, and commitment which would have appealed to a segment of the community affected by the policies of Great Britain and who viewed the regulations as a crisis and threat to their livelihood. The Sons of Liberty were not only a mechanism for local residents to voice opposition to British policies and specifically the Stamp Act, but they also provided an opportunity for men to gather and discuss local matters of importance.

It is difficult to identify the exact origin of the organized resistance movement in the North American Colonies as there are varying opinions among scholars regarding where the movement was first identified. The Sons of Liberty have been reported to have first appeared in New York as well as in Boston. The rise of the Sons of Liberty is noted in historical sources to have first occurred in New York in response to the Stamp Act and then spread to other cities including Boston, Charleston, Philadelphia, and New Haven. However, Todd Kreamer in his article, *Sons of Liberty: Patriots or Terrorists?*, noted that some contemporary scholars contend that the organization may have been started by Samuel Adams in the Boston area. Kreamer does not dispute either claim, but proposed that the two chapters “developed simultaneously.” It is difficult to examine this contradiction further as Kreamer failed to cite his sources for this item within his paper, but citations do exist within historical sources, such as research done by Pauline Maier, and thus appear to have greater credibility.

In his work, *The American Revolution*, Colin Bonwick also contends that the Sons of Liberty were originally formed in New York and then spread to other cities. He notes that the Sons of Liberty “created a framework for collaborative action” which
is supported by other historical sources. While there appeared to be various bodies within the Colonies that were displeased with Great Britain’s Parliamentary Acts that imposed taxation, it was not until the Sons of Liberty were formed that the mob mentality shifted from reactionary violence to a more organized resistance strategy. This period when the Sons of Liberty were being established was significant to early manifestations of the American identity because “the first signs of patriotism began to emerge” and the rallying cry “no taxation without representation” crossed social and economic boundaries.

It was this sense of patriotism that developed around the perception that Colonists’ liberty was threatened that led to the American ideal of each individual’s right to liberty and freedom from tyranny. The organized resistance movement was able to harness the Colonists’ passion for action and utilize it to not only bring about change in British policies, but also contribute to the development of certain aspects of the American identity. As “liberty mobs” emerged throughout the Colonies, the separation between the Colonies of North America and Great Britain began to widen to such an extent that it could not be repaired. This pronounced separation and unification around opposition to British imposed taxation and remote rule played a crucial role in the American Colonies’ developing a sense of patriotism and distinction.

Initial resistance to the Stamp Act was undisciplined and occurred in somewhat random outbreaks of violence, but Pauline Maier notes that “Colonists consciously retreated from mere ad hoc violence to an ordered opposition, as criteria of purpose and constraint were applied to extra legal crowd action.” This sense of purpose and
common goal that the Colonies should be free from tyranny and should not have their liberties curtailed by Parliament, served as catalyst to unite and to coordinate crowd activities within the Colonies. The manner in which the Sons of Liberty organized the community was significant because it not only contributed to the development of the American identity, but it also “shaped all subsequent colonial opposition to objectionable imperial claims on into the Revolutionary War.”

The idea that resistance efforts should be organized was not embraced until a majority of the Colonies had developed a recognized opposition to the Stamp Act. Prior to the Fall of 1765, groups functioned primarily independent of each other and were not part of an “intercolonial organization.” Independent clubs were able to concentrate on local matters of concern and respond to the immediate needs of the community. Local resistance groups were able to easily mobilize community support as residents were invested in rectifying issues such as limitations on trade or the imposition of taxes that affected local commerce.

While local Sons of Liberty would prove somewhat effective in generating support for opposition to British tactics of taxation and the imposition of remote rule, resistance leaders began to recognize that the Colonies’ strength remained in the cooperation of various smaller groups. The New York area is an example of how a formal organization was established and then spread through New England. In the course of her research, Maier found that “the idea of regularizing intercolonial cooperation against the Stamp Act sprang up independently in several widely separated Colonies, but the most intense organizational effort began and remained in New York.”
Membership of Clubs and Chapters

The Sons of Liberty have been documented to have existed in all 13 Colonies, with considerable activity occurring in New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. The clubs were primarily organized in urban centers, but also noted to exist in rural areas as well. Several scholars agree that under the leadership of John Lamb and Isaac Sears the Sons of Liberty were first established in New York. In addition to self-made men such as Lamb and Sears, New York was known for the powerful families of Delancy and Livingston who were interested in positions in the New York Assembly as well as ensuring that if the revolution was to proceed that it did so to the advantage of the privileged and genteel class.

In some cities, the Sons of Liberty would often meet in the evening “for reasons of safety and secrecy” as they hoped to avoid drawing the attention of the British troops and American Loyalists. Other clubs would publicize in the local paper the meeting date, location, and “publicly invite every lover of constitutional freedom” to attend the meeting. Notices such as this one from 1769 were posted around the city center or distributed as handbills as a way to spread information of the group’s activities. This specific handbill outlines seven resolutions passed by the New York Sons of Liberty that relate to the Non-Importation Agreement and how men who possess “invaluable Rights, which our Ancestors purchased with their Blood” should conduct themselves so that these rights which “derive from Nature” are preserved for posterity.

The communication of activities to club members as well as other residents was a vital component of gaining support for the resistance movement. To this end, there was
“special significance of printers’ membership in the Sons of Liberty,” and it was not uncommon for local newspapers to “serve as a forum for the formation of policy and remained the prime vehicle of uniting the population.”  

For example, *The New York Gazette and Weekly Postboy* was noted to be a “principal organ of the Sons of Liberty” and would publish notices and advertisements related to their activity.

It was not uncommon for a handbill or notice to be reprinted in a local newspaper. Advertisements would vary in content, format, and tone with some being direct and concise and others being satirical in nature. For example, the following advertisement printed in New York in December 1773 announced the meeting date and time of the local Sons of Liberty.

> The Members of the Association of the Sons of Liberty, are requested to meet at the City Hall at one o’Clock, Tomorrow, (being Friday) on Business of utmost Importance – And every other Friend to the Liberties, and Trade of America, are hereby most cordially invited, to meet at the same Time and Place.

> The Committee of the Association

Similar to other printed materials by the Sons of Liberty, the advertisement of 1773 included an open invitation encouraging other residents to attend the meeting. It was important to the Sons of Liberty and the resistance movement overall that its meetings be open to new members, thus “winning a mass base, with converting the population at large into Sons of Liberty.”

The Sons of Liberty were labeled as an “extralegal organization” and were noted to be one of many “Revolutionary bodies.” Their leadership consistently consisted of “master craftsmen, merchants, and professional groups” and the membership was comprised of “professional men, lesser merchants, and even local officials.”
scale of the colonial resistance movement is evident by the variety of individuals who played a role in the various revolutionary groups. While the membership composition varied by location, Bonwick noted that “members of the upper ranks of colonial society served on committees in some areas such as New Port, Rhode Island, Virginia, and North Carolina.” 36

According to Phillip Sheldon Foner in his work, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, it was the “rank-in-file workingmen” who included mechanics, tradesmen, carpenters, joiners, printers, shipwrights, smiths, and masons that were more radical than the leadership. 37 Foner also contends that it was this level of membership that “pushed both the leadership and the Revolution forward.” 38 Similar to other Revolutionary bodies, the Sons of Liberty were closed to free blacks, slaves, servants, and women and remained an all-white and all-male organization. 39

While many members were middle class workingmen, the Sons of Liberty in Charleston was primarily comprised of artisans and “considerable efforts were made to widen the social base by holding mass meetings and involving the body of the people.” 40 The membership of such groups was characterized by artisans, shopkeepers, printers, and mechanics. In Charlestown, the mechanics were known to “disseminate propaganda essentially the same as brother radicals in other provinces” and pressured citizens and businesses to support the non-importation response to the Townshend Acts. 41

In his work, *Charleston’s Sons of Liberty A Study of the Artisans 1763-1789*, Richard Walsh identifies the mechanic of Charleston “mainly as a man of business” and notes that “these concerns largely motivated his revolutionary activities.” 42
Recognizing these motivations, it is not surprising that the mechanics of Charleston united in opposition to the Stamp Act and became invested in the political process. Similar to other organized forms of resistance, the Charleston Sons of Liberty persuaded merchants and traders to boycott British goods in opposition to the Stamp Act, and Walsh reports that one ship captain received a letter from the Sons of Liberty indicating that his vessel would be destroyed if he violated the boycott.

The various chapters of the Sons of Liberty were formed at the local level and provided a structure to unite citizens who opposed the Stamp Act. The Sons of Liberty were known for their role in promoting resistance to British regulatory and revenue acts and it is reported that the organization was originally formed in response to the Stamp Act of 1765 and was disbanded following the repeal of the Act in 1766. Documentation does exist however indicating that the Sons of Liberty resurfaced in 1768 in response to the Townshend Acts.

Despite the various names used to refer to the Sons of Liberty or “Sons of Violence” as labeled by Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, the chapters shared two features in common and those were a fervent opposition to Britain’s unconstitutional policies and a resolution to “do more than publish and talk” but rather “plot violence” against representatives of the British policies. In Boston, a small group of men deemed the Loyal Nine were known to have met at the “Chase and Speakman’s distillery on Hanover Square” and in August 1765 they met to strategize ways to attack Andrew Oliver, Distributor of Stamps in Massachusetts.
According to Miller, the Colonies “were soon covered with a network of these clubs which served as headquarters for patriot leaders who set the mobs to work terrorizing the stamp masters.” The Sons of Liberty usually had a common meeting place such as a tavern or meeting hall and membership remained secretive, but it was not uncommon for a local group to draw support from an upper-class, affluent, patron such as John Hancock’s support of the Massachusetts patriots in Boston. Miller also noted that the Sons of Liberty “marked the first effective intercolonial union and paved the way for the later Continental Congress.”

Communication between the groups in various states proved difficult, but not impossible. Sons of Liberty were able to communicate and “coordinate resistance to the mother country by using the post office.” Communication would also be accomplished by way of messenger and newspapers. Various chapters of the Sons of Liberty were known to have Committees of Correspondence which would be responsible for drafting letters to inform other chapters of their activities.

**Presence within Colonies**

The spread of the revolutionary movement can be attributed to its appeal that crossed class lines. Citizens of all class levels were affected financially by the Revenue Act and subsequently the Stamp Act imposed by Great Britain. The taxation of items such as molasses, which was used to make rum and included within the Revenue Acts of 1764, negatively affected a majority of Colonists and their quality of life.

The forms of mass violence exhibited by the Sons of Liberty such as vandalism, assault, and mob beatings had been utilized by other groups, but for different purposes.
In colonial seaports young men were impressed into sea duty through the use of violence and rival urban gangs were known to engage in mob beatings. However, the Sons of Liberty were different because of their organization and they often included members of the upper class. It is interesting to note that while on the surface the mob activities appeared to be spontaneous bursts of violence, but in reality they were “highly disciplined demonstrations” and were “carefully planned.” The Sons of Liberty utilized various forms of mass violence for political purposes, often engaging mobs to resist the implementation of the Stamp Act.

It was in Boston that the presence of the Sons of Liberty was greatly pronounced during the period of 1765-1776. Their activities under the leadership of Samuel Adams was deemed some of the “fiercest opposition to Britain’s revenue laws” and labeled as a “militant group of agitators.” While the Boston Sons of Liberty may have gained notoriety for participating in the Boston Tea Party, their presence reached beyond mob activities as they “conducted a campaign that skillfully combined violence with sophisticated legal and political strategy.” Club members were known to be involved in several areas of government including elected positions in the Massachusetts Assembly.

It was their appeal and engagement of the populace as well as their presence in the legal and political structure of the colony that became a significant source of frustration for the ministers and Governor Hutchinson who was unable to “find people willing to testify against the radicals.” Loyalty to and intimidation by the Sons of Liberty prevented the successful prosecution of rioters and those deemed as “Boston
militants.” 62 The Sons of Liberty in Boston were known to have created a “constitutional problem” for the King and his representatives, and it was “Samuel Adams and his wild men” who had “undermined” what had been a representative system in Massachusetts. 63

Considering Samuel Adams’ status as a brewer and the central role of the tavern in colonial life during this period, it is reasonable that taverns or meeting houses usually served as the location of gatherings for the Sons of Liberty. As Kym Rice notes in *Early American Ta
cerns: for the Entertainment of Friends and Strangers*, “as urban society grew, the city tavern became simultaneously a meeting house, market place, restaurant, political arena, social setting, hotel, and communication hub.” 64 Rice also notes that taverns played a significant role in small towns often serving as the “center for the community.” 65 In terms of events leading up to the American Revolution, “within the tavern context, ordinary citizens had an opportunity to express their opinions and hear the viewpoints of others.” 66 The debate and political activities that occurred in taverns made them a natural setting for various groups such as the Sons of Liberty. According to Rice, the size of city taverns was conducive to groups as they could hold the large number of members and their supporters. 67

As Rice’s research reveals, taverns in the North American Colonies served several purposes with many of those being similar to drinking houses in England. In his book, *The English Alehouse A Social History 1200-1830*, Peter Clark contends that “drinking houses are both ubiquitous and indispensable social agencies, their importance extending well beyond the provision of alcohol and other forms of refreshment to their
role as the centre for a host of economic, social, political, and other activities.” The idea of the local tavern being a social agency made it conducive to being a venue where people would feel comfortable expressing their displeasure and concerns regarding their future, such as when faced by the restrictions of the Revenue and Stamp Act.

It was at the local tavern that travelers or visitors to the town or village would learn of activities related to the resistance movement either through meetings of the Sons of Liberty or as a result of the tavern being the “essential node of communication.” It was through this form of communication in addition to newspapers, correspondence, and printed materials such as handbills that information regarding the Sons of Liberty was spread between Colonies and contributed to what would become their network of clubs. It was Thomas Paine who drafted *The Rights of Man* in the London pub, the Old Red Lion, who said that “the English pub was ‘the cradle of American independence.”

The many purposes served by a tavern may have been beneficial to the community from the perspective of the common man, but the tavern was often viewed by government officials as being a potential headquarters for rebels and their activities. While some groups would meet in secret, other groups would meet openly at the local tavern. It was these open meetings that made governments “quick to recognize the threat that taverns, alehouses and so forth posed to public order through the drunken brawls of customers and other more nefarious activities.”

This perception that the Sons of Liberty would use a local tavern as their headquarters was not unfounded. Montagne’s Tavern on Broadway in New York City was known to be the “headquarters for the Sons of Liberty” in January of 1770. It was
on January 16, 1770 that “fragments of the fourth Liberty pole, which the soldiers of the 16th regiment has just chopped down,” were left on the doorstep of Montagne’s Tavern as a notice to the Sons of Liberty. 73

Several significant events of the American Revolution were planned during tavern meetings of the Sons of Liberty, according to Rice. She notes that “during meetings, the group discussed strategy, and drafted statements and resolutions which were then printed as broadsides or handbills for distribution.” 74 The initial plans for the Boston Tea Party and a similar activity in New York were developed during a tavern meeting. 75 Rice notes that Samuel Fraunces, proprietor of the Fraunces Tavern in New York, would allow the Sons of Liberty to convene meetings in his establishment. 76 Fraunces was known to be a patriot and his tavern “housed a number of radical activities.” 77 In her research, Rice found that the “New York Tea party was launched from the tavern” and that Fraunces was involved in uncovering the Hickey conspiracy, which was a plan to assassinate George Washington. 78 Rice mentions that George Washington delivered his farewell address to his officers at the Fraunces Tavern on December 4, 1783. 79

Fraunces Tavern, formerly known as Queen’s Head, was at one time frequented by “the best people in New York” and known for its Madeira wine and “Long Room.” 80 The tavern was also known as the “Free Masons’ Arms” and was the location for “many meetings of protest” prior to the Revolution. 81 As noted by Rice, Fraunces, sympathetic to the American cause, provided “aid to American prisoners” and was subsequently commended by Congress following the conclusion of the war. 82
addition to planning related to the New York Tea Party, the Long Room within Fraunces Tavern was known to have been where “tavern merchants met to consider uniting with the other Colonies in calling a congress” and where the New York delegates hosted the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress.  

Similar to Fraunces Tavern in New York, the Indian Queen Tavern in Philadelphia was also prominent during the American Revolution as it was there that Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence. During this time, taverns would also have sleeping rooms and it was while Thomas Jefferson stayed at the Indian Queen that he did his writing. As in New York, “many stirring meetings were held before the outbreak of the War of the Revolution in taverns whose landlords were in sympathy with the cause of the patriots.”

Tavern meetings contributed to the perception that the Sons of Liberty were a rowdy and disorderly group of mob bandits. In her study, Rice includes an “unfriendly description” of a Sons of Liberty meeting in New York City, “after carousing and drinking very plentifully and heating themselves with Liquor, in the glorious cause of Liberty, as they call it, they sallied out into the evening to put their project in execution.” While this account may accurately reflect the inebriated condition of members identified as the Sons of Liberty, it should not be startling as drinking was common during this period. Rice contends that “drinking accompanied every social occasion and special event: births, weddings, funerals, political meetings and church ordinations.”
In addition to meeting in taverns with sympathetic proprietors, the Sons of Liberty were also known to meet at a designated location within their city or town which was often under a specific tree. The tree was deemed the Liberty Tree and it would become the “symbol of American opposition to king and Parliament.” There are examples of Liberty Trees being consecrated in New York, Charleston, Roxbury and Boston. Liberty Poles were also erected in protest against the Stamp Act and would have banners or messages in opposition to the Stamp Act.

The first Liberty Tree is reported to have been designated in Boston in August 1765 when a group of men in protest against the Stamp Act presented a drama related to the consequences of the Act and ultimately incited a riot that included the hanging of the tax collector in effigy and an attack on personal property. The tree from which the effigy was hung was labeled the Liberty Tree and was recognized as a living symbol of the Colonists’ fight to protect their individual liberties. Following this incident, Sons of Liberty chapters and clubs in other Colonies identified Liberty Trees or erected Liberty Poles to convey their opposition to the Stamp Act and Britain’s violation of their individual liberties.

The symbol of the Liberty Tree continued to represent the patriot cause and opposition to British tyranny following repeal of the Stamp Act as it appeared on a naval flag, within contemporary prints, and poetry of the time. The “Liberty Tree” flag had a white background and green pine tree and the text “An Appeal to Heaven.” It was known to have been flown by ships within New England. The image of a Liberty Tree was often included in prints used to criticize the patriot cause as in “The Bostonians
paying the excise-man, or tarring and feathering” which featured a customs official being tarred and feathered by patriots under a Liberty Tree. The print was created in 1774 by a British artist and the official depicted was John Malcolm, Boston Commissioner of Customs.

While the image of the Liberty Tree was utilized in anti-patriot materials that attempted to expose the cruelty and savagery of the rebels, it also appeared in a poem by Thomas Paine in 1775 entitled, “Liberty Tree” that was used to engender support and unify Colonists around the resistance movement. The poem was put to music and sung by supporters of the resistance movement as it reiterated the Colonists’ desire for independence from Great Britain and their need to be unified in their struggle.

For freemen like brothers agree;  
With one spirit endued, they one friendship pursued,  
And their temple was Liberty Tree...  
From the east to the west blow the trumpet to arms,  
Through the land let the sound of it flee,  
Let the far and the near, all unite with a cheer,  
In defense of our Liberty Tree.

**Other Revolutionary Organizations**

While women were not officially allowed to participate in the activities of the Sons of Liberty, they were able to join an organization called the Daughters of Liberty. Although this was a small effort, it demonstrated the ability of the Sons of Liberty to inspire rebellion in other individuals. The Daughters of Liberty showed their opposition to the Tea Act by refusing to drink tea and by boycotting other British goods. During
this time, “female patriots had taken to brewing all sorts of local potions and giving them clever names such as Liberty Tea” made from loosestrife.\textsuperscript{101}

Women participated by “devoting themselves to spinning and weaving and passing resolutions pledging not to patronize merchants who broke the Non-Importation Agreement.”\textsuperscript{102} An instance of crowd action was reported which included the Daughters of Liberty “lacking tar and feathers” covering a man who had denounced the Revolution with molasses and flowers.\textsuperscript{103} Support from the Daughters of Liberty was appreciated and acknowledged by the various Sons of Liberty with the Boston Sons of Liberty passing “a resolution thanking their female associates in Providence for their firm stand in defense of American rights.”\textsuperscript{104} Women were also reported to wear muslin instead of satins and silks which were subject to taxation.\textsuperscript{105}

Women did not need to join the Daughters of Liberty to contribute to the resistance movement, as they could exert control over areas such as the household supplies and clothing for their family. In defiance of the tax on British goods, such as tea, housewives were known to boycott British goods.\textsuperscript{106} Women would also turn to “spinning” and “home production” in an attempt to avoid the need to purchase British goods.\textsuperscript{107} Other groups that were involved included students and artisans both of which complied with the Non-Importation Agreement by making choices to avoid consumption of British goods. For example, students would forgo imported wine and tea and artisans became politically active in an attempt to provide input into the tax structure and regulations.\textsuperscript{108}
Scholars have determined that there were groups that identified themselves as the Sons of Liberty during the revolutionary period, but were not actually part of the organization. Several instances have been cited of groups that were not “true” Sons of Liberty rather they perpetrated violence for personal gain and detracted from the political purposes of the original Sons of Liberty. As noted by Miller, “gangs borrowing the popular name of Sons of Liberty began to rob and pillage private houses, and although the patriots denied any hand in these outrages, the name ‘Son of Liberty’ came to have a distinctly bad odor.”

According to Maier, at the time of the Stamp Act crisis there was growing acceptance of the resistance movement, but this did not make all protests and mob violence justifiable. She contends that there were “just and unjust uprisings” and “acceptable and unacceptable uses of mass force.” Considering this context, the presence of gangs which operated out of a desire for personal gain and under the label of the Sons of Liberty would diminish support for the revolutionary cause as its supporters were perceived as being motivated by financial gain rather than a desire to protect individual liberties.

It was important for these other revolutionary organizations to maintain a focus and sense of purpose related to the revolutionary movement and its overall goal, which by the Stamp Act of 1765, had begun to shift from reconciliation to separation from Great Britain. Maier notes that “leaders and followers were enjoined to remember always that they sought to win a redress of grievances, not to occasion new ones.” This did not always prevent mass violence from being taken to an extreme in some
cases, but it did serve as a method by which a benchmark or threshold could be established that would evaluate activities. Directives were issued that stipulated the parameters of mob violence as the “greatest care was necessary ‘to keep an undisciplined irregular Multitude’ from running into mischievous Extravagancies.”

While other revolutionary groups such as the Daughters of Liberty and undisciplined and non-affiliated liberty mobs were present during 1765-1776, it was the organized resistance movement as embodied by the Sons of Liberty and their quest for independence that contributed to the early manifestations of the American identity. The organized resistance movement began within the northeastern region of the North American Colonies primarily in the cities of Boston and New York. The Sons of Liberty were able to communicate their activities via newspapers, correspondence, and handbills and once information spread to other Colonies about their activities, additional cities and towns formed their own Sons of Liberty. There were Sons of Liberty reported in all of the thirteen Colonies. The Sons of Liberty appealed to Colonists of various social and economic backgrounds, thus allowing its membership to expand and increase its base of support. It was this broad base of support that contributed to the organized resistance movement spreading throughout the Colonies and resulted in an intercolonial network of clubs that were united in opposition to Stamp Act. The appeal of the Sons of Liberty crossed social classes as each Colonist regardless of their position in society was affected by the taxes placed on materials by the Stamp Act. The tax on tea and other British goods affected almost all of the residents and while it may not have been a
financial hardship to the wealthy, it was a demonstration of Britain’s desire to curtail their liberties.

The Stamp Act with its accompanying taxes incited many of the merchants, mechanics, craftsmen, and upper class gentlemen to join their local Sons of Liberty and to engage in resistance activities. Members were united around the desire to maintain their right to regulate taxes and to identify their political leaders, which were based upon the ideals of liberty and a right to self-rule. Sons of Liberty would communicate their activities through notices developed by their Committees of Correspondence and advertisements in newspapers, posted broadsides, and distributed handbills. It was not unusual to find a meeting notice and resolutions passed by the local Sons of Liberty displayed prominently near or on the Liberty Tree or Pole of that city or town. The Liberty Tree would come to symbolize the Colonists’ fight to be free from tyranny and their opposition to the remote rule of Great Britain. The Liberty Tree was featured in a variety of mediums including on a flag flown by naval ships, within contemporary prints, and as the focus of poetry and songs.

In addition to the Liberty Tree, taverns would often serve as meeting places of the Sons of Liberty. Each town or city would have at least one tavern, which served as the center of the social community and the primary communication hub. Taverns provided a venue where men from various class levels could meet and discuss politics and local government issues.

Lastly, there were other revolutionary organizations that contributed to resistance movement and its influence on the American Revolution and early manifestations of the
American identity. The political ideology of the resistance movement appealed to a significant portion of Colonists and they were motivated to voice their opposition to Great Britain’s Parliamentary Acts by joining the Sons of Liberty. The revolutionary movement which began in the Northeast region of the North American Colonies and spread throughout the mid-Atlantic area would prove to be a significant vehicle in driving the Colonies toward independence.
CHAPTER 3

KEY FIGURES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SONS OF LIBERTY

While a majority of the leaders within the Sons of Liberty remained anonymous, there were several key figures which significantly influenced the development and expansion of the organized resistance movement. These individuals were from varying backgrounds and social status, but they all shared a devotion to the revolutionary cause and a desire for Great Britain to address the grievances of the Colonists. The primary issue in regard to the Stamp Act was the taxation of the Colonies without representation in Parliament. Those significant individuals included Samuel Adams, John Hancock, John Morin Scott, and John Lamb.

These individuals are critical when examining the impact of the organized resistance movement on the American Revolution and early manifestations of the American identity because they embodied several characteristics that would ultimately become identifiable as American. Among those characteristics was a desire to protect individual liberties and to participate in a representative system. While each of the individuals profiled has had a unique role within the Sons of Liberty, they shared a devotion to the cause of liberty and to the right of the Colonies to self-rule.

During the period of 1765-1776, there were numerous chapters of the Sons of Liberty within each of the thirteen Colonies and the two most prominent and active clubs were in Boston and New York. The organized resistance movement originated within these cities in response to the Stamp Act and clubs within New York and Boston were
know to have spearheaded activities within the other Colonies. Of the above individuals, Samuel Adams and John Hancock were from Boston and John Morin Scott and John Lamb were from New York. The selection of these individuals was not meant to diminish the activities of patriots in other cities such as Charleston or Philadelphia, but these individuals share common attributes that resulted in their significant contributions to the organized resistance movement.

One common attribute of all these men was their ability to motivate and to mobilize groups of residents in opposition to the Stamp Act. Through their rhetoric and skills of debate, these leaders were able to articulate the effect of not engaging in the opposition movement and it was the consequences and implications of non-action that threatened the liberty of all residents. It was also through their use of propaganda and accounts of successful mob activities and collaborative action that they were able to inspire chapters of the Sons of Liberty to form in other communities. Scholars, such as Pauline Maier and Collin Bonwick, have noted it was only because the organized resistance movement was able to spread throughout the Colonies that it was successful in engendering support for the Revolution.

Another contribution was their role within their respective community as well as other Colonies to sustain the movement whether it was through financial support or various strategies to maintain the momentum of the patriot cause and to broaden the resistance movement. Each of these individuals possessed charisma which proved effective in moving people towards action and they also employed techniques to sustain interest and to ensure that opposition activities remained focused on the overall goal of
the movement, whether the activity was an intimate meeting under the local Liberty Tree or a large mass meeting and subsequent march through the city to the square. It was essential to the movement that pressure be applied to Great Britain on several fronts including from the Colonies as well as by English merchants.

Lastly, these four individuals were significant to the Sons of Liberty because each had a role in shaping the resistance movement and facilitating progress towards the movement’s goal, such as through the organization of chapters and clubs, presenting a united front to Great Britain, and the coordination of activities and protests to ensure that they were organized and conducted with a purpose. The key leaders of the organized resistance movement were able to harness the energy of the populace and direct it towards a constructive outcome.

**Samuel Adams: Political Organizer of Boston**

Samuel Adams (1722-1803) was from Boston and while he was not successful in business despite graduating from Harvard, he was a noted political organizer during the Revolution. A source of inspiration for Adams as a young man were the famous preachers that he would visit with his family. As a result of this exposure, Adams had initially considered a career in the ministry as he was impressed by the preachers and “how their soaring words moved listeners’ spirits, sometimes sparking a wellspring of heartfelt tears, vows to live better lives, and pledges to examine their beliefs.” Adams’ interest in theology would fade once he recognized that similar to his father, he was well skilled in debate and “was keenly interested in civic affairs.” His shift in focus, from the conservative, religious community to the realm of public service, could be attributed...
to an sense within the Colonies that in order to gain recognition from Great Britain that the tradition of conservatism would need to be replaced with direct action.

While his father, Samuel Adams, Sr. appreciated industry and was successful in acquiring property and growing his business interests, he was also very devout and became a prominent figure in the church for which he was made a Deacon. During the mid-eighteenth century, leaders within the Boston community were mostly ministers and merchants. As in the case of Deacon Adams, he was a skilled political organizer in addition to serving as “justice of the peace, selectman and member of the colonial legislature as well as a member in a host of politically active trade clubs.” His influence on the community and his son, Samuel Adams, was significant.

Another factor that contributed to Sam Adams’ development as a political organizer was his respect for his ancestors and their struggle to survive and to do well in the Colonies. His admiration was evident as, “his forebears loomed larger than life in his eyes, courageous, principled, and willing to withstand the hardships of an untamed land to build a better life for their descendants.” Adams seemed to have a deep appreciation for their sacrifices and recognized that “his world was the reward of their sacrifices.” It was this appreciation for personal freedom and liberties that made him a strong advocate for the resistance movement that was focused upon preserving the liberties of the Colonists. Adams possessed certain characteristics that would come to be associated with the American middle class such as his respect for his ancestors, recognition of their sacrifices on his behalf, and seeking success based upon merit.
Adams’ use of rhetoric was a powerful tool in mobilizing residents of Boston to oppose the Stamp Act. His debate skills were first developed at Harvard where “he staged debates with classmates and learned how to make persuasive arguments for his case.” It was this ability to identify key points within an argument and present the opposing perspective in a logical and accessible manner that made him a popular leader at the onset of the resistance movement. As Ralph Volney Harlow notes in his work, *Samuel Adams Promoter of the American Revolution*, Adams was “one of the best expositors of radical political philosophy” and “his arguments were generally logical, and always convincing, and he possessed to a remarkable degree that rare capacity for making the abstract doctrines seem vitally alive to the ‘man on the street.’”

The political philosophy of Samuel Adams was heavily influenced by the writings of John Locke which were focused on a “respect for private property” as well as a desire to protect civil liberties. These two aspects of Adams’ political philosophy are evident in regards to the formation of the Sons of Liberty and the group’s success in generating grassroots support for the organized resistance movement. Another aspect of Locke’s philosophy that is evident within Adams’ leadership of the Sons of Liberty was the role of government in relation to civil rights, and he believed that “the role of government was to protect these rights, not limit them.”

While preserving individual liberties was a core element of Adams’ political philosophy, he also recognized that the Colonies’ ability to regulate their own trade relationships was crucial to ensuring their future economic growth and viability. Adams was very astute in the realm of politics and economics despite his failed attempts to
pursue a career as a businessman; he “believed economic and political freedoms were inextricably linked.” 14 It was because of this philosophy that Adams was greatly concerned with Great Britain’s attempt to curtail trade opportunities for the Colonies and in “his view, British leaders wanted to keep America’s economic growth in check.” 15 The belief that Great Britain was restraining the Colonies and their prosperity contributed to the growing resentment and desire for independence rather than reconciliation. Economic growth was essential to the Colonies’ ability to maintain their livelihood.

Samuel Adams’ various career attempts included serving as a tax collector for Boston for which he was elected in 1756, member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, and brewer. 16 Adams’ term as a tax collector was tainted by allegations of misconduct as “after eight years he was found to be 7,000 pounds short in his accounts.” 17 The lifestyle led by Adams and his family did not indicate that he was embezzling funds for personal gain, rather he was noted to be “kindhearted, easy-going and sympathetic” and “he could never bring himself to press tax delinquents to pay up.” 18 He was not successful as a brewer either as the business “went bankrupt” due to Adams’ failure to collect on delinquent accounts. 19 It might appear that Sam Adams lacked ambition, but when it came to matters related to rights, he was intense and diligent. Several sources recorded that Adams would work late into the night on his writings that voiced his opposition to the Stamp Act, and his wife, Betsy, “frequently fell asleep to the ‘lullaby’ of her husband’s quill scratching in the next room.” 20 Rather than
being an issue of ambition or laziness, Adams’ failure as a businessman may have been due to a lack of passion.

Samuel Adams was known to have authored many essays, letters, and documents despite suffering from palsy which resulted in tremors in his hands. 21 While the palsy at times affected his public speaking, it was his “warm personality that charmed people and made him a thousand friends in all walks of life.” 22 He was known to be “untidy and indifferent about his dress” often referred to as “Spartan” as it would include “a patched tailcoat, shabby waistcoat, a show of threadbare white linen at the throat, homespun breeches, wool stockings and shoes with scratched brass buckles.” 23 In his personal life, Adams suffered tremendous grief as his wife had six children in seven years, with only two surviving to adulthood and his wife, Elizabeth, passed away of complications following the birth of their last child. 24

In the work, An Appeal to the world, or, A vindication of the Town of Boston (1769), which was ascribed to William Cooper, but is believed to have been authored by Samuel Adams, Adams discusses the public’s reaction to the Revenue Acts and their right to hostility for the Acts limited their personal liberties.

That the People should entertain the highest Dignity of a Board, instituted to superintend a Revenue to be rais’d from them without their Consent, which was and still is exacted with the utmost Rigor, is natural; after they had so loudly as well as justly complain’d of the Revenue itself, as depriving them of the very Idea of Liberty…. 25

Adams is credited with helping to organize the Sons of Liberty in Boston in response to the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts and participating in the Boston Tea
Sam Adams was the son of a brewer, cousin to John Adams, and was an early supporter of independence. Adams served in the First and Second Continental Congresses and was elected governor of Massachusetts in 1793.

Sam Adams was also known for drafting the Circular Letter of 1768 which “included a first statement of the colonial constitutional position” and urged the Colonies to unite in opposition to the Townshend Acts. In addition, he authored and contributed to a number of articles and pamphlets in support of the resistance movement. Adams would often contribute to newspapers under the alias of “Determinatus.” Sam Adams was an active member of the Committee of Correspondence, which drafted The State of the Rights of Colonists and List of Infringements and Violations of Rights in November 1772.

While Samuel Adams is widely recognized as one of the founders of the Sons of Liberty, he often collaborated with James Otis when speaking against the legislative acts imposed by Great Britain. James Otis was a Harvard educated lawyer, who was known for being an eloquent writer, having drafted the “widely distributed pamphlet, The Rights of the British Colonists Asserted and Proved.” Otis was a citizen of Boston and had defended merchants against British search warrants. Otis was also known to be affiliated with the Boston Sons of Liberty and to be a strong supporter of the Non-Importation Agreement. He was struck by lightening and killed in 1782.

**John Hancock: Mercantile Elite and the Sons of Liberty**

Another key figure in the organized resistance movement within the Boston area was John Hancock (1737-1793). Hancock played a significant role in the expansion of
the Sons of Liberty as it was his financial and political support that provided the resistance movement legitimacy in the eyes of the affluent and mercantile community. He was referred to as the “angel” of the resistance movement in Boston and was noted to be connected to mob factions as well. 35

Hancock was orphaned at a young age and was adopted by his uncle, Thomas Hancock. Thomas Hancock had established the House of Hancock, a “commercial empire,” comprised of real estate, shipping, and import/export holdings, yet he had no children and identified in John Hancock a potential heir. 36 The Hancocks were a well-established, wealthy family and John attended the best schools in Boston and went onto Harvard in 1750. 37 While at Harvard, John Hancock did not excel academically rather he was “content to glean Harvard’s cultural veneer and such practical business skills as higher mathematics, logic, public speaking, and debating.” 38 These skills in addition to the degree were considered essential to “entry into the tightly knit circle of aristocratic Harvard alumni who governed New England political, economic, and social affairs.” 39

In stark contrast to Samuel Adams who was known to care little of his appearance, John Hancock was described as a “foppish pseudoaristocrat” who indulged in “fashionable wigs, frilled shirts, silk and velvet jackets and breeches.” 40 His taste for elegant clothes and the finest wines was learned from his uncle Thomas who was known to revel in his wealth and his status as one of the richest merchants in the North American Colonies. It was the elder Hancock who acquired the acreage and mansion on Beacon Hill overlooking the town and wharf below. 41
Hancock was known as a fierce patriot and gained prominence in the resistance movement quickly. He served in the Boston Assembly in 1766, in the Continental Congress in 1774, and as President of the Continental Congress in 1775. Hancock was reported to be a major smuggler and supporter of the Boston Sons of Liberty. Initially Hancock was not greatly concerned with the regulatory acts imposed by Great Britain because he was used to bribing custom officials in the course of doing business, and he did not believe that violations would be prosecuted since enforcement had been previously non-existent. However, once it became evident that the Act’s significant restrictions would be detrimental to his import and export business, he decided to participate in the opposition movement.

Prior to his decision to support the Sons of Liberty, Hancock was not impressed by Samuel Adams as he found him to be a lower class “rabble rouser.” As part of the affluent circle of merchant families, Hancock was an associate of Andrew Oliver and was shocked and greatly concerned when Oliver was attacked by a mob affiliated with the Sons of Liberty. Within this climate of unrest and political uncertainty, Hancock remained focused on his businesses and determined that it was in his best interest to support the patriot cause rather than face potential violent retributions at the hands of the mob. While he recognized that support of the Sons of Liberty would equate to treason in the eyes of Great Britain, he continued to contribute financially to the cause and would ultimately come to the forefront of the organized resistance movement.

His role in mobilizing the resistance movement was very different from the rowdy antics of Samuel Adams as Hancock’s influence was initially concentrated upon
supporting the Non-Importation Agreement that was adopted in an attempt to have the Stamp Act repealed. His participation was critical to engendering support among the mercantile community. It was Samuel Adams who believed that Hancock should participate in activities of the Sons of Liberty as “Hancock would add an important element then missing in the independence movement” and that was the support of the merchants and affluent leaders within the community.48 A saavy and successful businessman, Hancock recognized that the boycott would benefit his financial position. The boycott provided an opportunity for Hancock to reduce his inventories and due to a lack of stamps, he was unable to pay his debts in London.49

Another way that John Hancock contributed to the mobilization of the Sons of Liberty was by choosing not to pursue the prosecution of looters, who were part of the riots in Boston in 1765.50 By not using his political power against the patriots, he was conveying to Great Britain that the organized resistance mentality embodied by the Sons of Liberty and the revolutionary movement were gaining momentum and not facing opposition within the Colonies. The choice to not prosecute was significant regardless of whether it was due to intimidation or it was a conscious tactic to portray himself as an ally to the opposition movement, the choice implied his compliance with the Sons of Liberty and their utilization of mob violence and vandalism.

John Hancock was also able to generate enthusiasm and to encourage residents to participate in the Sons of Liberty and their activities by displaying a concern for the poor and neglected that had not previously been undertaken. It was noted that he would ride through Boston “on the lookout for opportunities to relieve the most hard-pressed of
Boston’s underprivileged, directly and indirectly."  

As a result of his humanitarian efforts, Hancock’s reputation grew as did his status within the community and thus his influence on the residents of Boston. During this period of the eighteenth century, it was rare that members of the upper class would associate or assist people in need as “Boston had never seen any man of such evident wealth show such deep concern for the unfortunate.”

As a key figure in the organized resistance movement during the period of 1765-1776, John Hancock was instrumental in shaping and sustaining the movement through his financial contributions to the patriot cause, by exerting his influence as a member of the mercantile elite, and wielding his political capital to support the Sons of Liberty and their opposition to the Stamp Act. In terms of his support of the movement, Hancock was known to have contributed funds and supplies needed to sustain the activities of the Sons of Liberty. For example, once word reached Boston that the Stamp Act had been repealed, the “Sons of Liberty gathered at the Liberty Tree before parading to the debtor’s prison with John Hancock’s cash to buy the release of the all of the inmates.”

While this was a very public display of his donation to the cause, he was initially a more reserved contributor as he labeled rebels, such as Samuel Adams, as “hotheads” because at the onset of the resistance movement, he “favor[ed] mediation and reconciliation” at the onset of resistance movement. Hancock spent a considerable portion of his fortune on arms and ammunition used by the Sons of Liberty and their associates.

As a respected member of the mercantile elite, John Hancock was able to exert influence on other businessmen and persuade them to participate in the Non-Importation
Agreement. The Agreement or boycott of British goods was a significant component of the Sons of Liberty’s strategy to bring about the repeal of the Stamp Act. It was because the merchants and shopkeepers collaborated and followed the stipulations of the Non-Importation Agreement that Britain received pressure to repeal the Stamp Act. 56

Merchants and business owners in Britain began to propose that the Stamp Act be repealed as they were experiencing the financial downside to the policy. 57 John Hancock’s influence stretched beyond Boston as he was well known in other cities and Colonies, and his support legitimized the movement and contributed to the Colonies developing a united front against Great Britain. 58

Hancock was asked to deliver an oration during a gathering to commemorate the anniversary of the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1774. It was during this speech that Hancock states his political belief regarding the role of government and the duty of residents to ensure a safe and secure community.

I have always from my earliest youth, rejoiced in the felicity of my Fellow-men, and have ever confider’d it as the indifpenſible duty of every member of society to promote, as far as in him lies, the prosperity of every individual, but more efpecially of the community to which he belongs; and also, as a faithful ſubject of the ſtate, to uſe his utmoſt endeavors to detect, and having detected, ſtreuouſly to oppoſe every traiterous plot which its enemies may devife for its defeſtruction…Some boaft of being friends to government; I am a friend to righteous government, to a government founded upon the principles of reaſon and juſtice; but I glory in publickly avowing my eternal enmity to tyranny. … 59

Through his charitable work and success as a business owner, John Hancock became a popular figure and was “loved by ordinary people of Boston and the rest of Massachusetts” as the perception was that he was willing to “underwrite their welfare
and independence.”

Once he decided that it was in his best interest to join the rebels, Hancock abandoned his conservative tendencies and began to embrace the independence movement. Examples of how Hancock publicly demonstrated his sponsorship and collaboration with the Sons of Liberty, included the seizure of his ship, Liberty, and his grand celebration following the announcement that the Stamp Act had been repealed.

**John Morin Scott: New York Lawyer and Patriot**

While Samuel Adams and John Hancock were significant figures in the Sons of Liberty in the Boston area, John Morin Scott and John Lamb were influential in the New York Sons of Liberty. John Morin Scott was a young member of the New York Sons of Liberty organization and was instrumental in their resistance activities leading up to the revolution. He was noted to be “one of the most radical of the Sons of Liberty” and was the son of a wealthy merchant. According to John C. Miller, John Morin Scott owned a great deal of land in New York and was indirectly connected to mob violence in the city. He was a graduate of Yale and a popular lawyer in New York. John Morin Scott is known to have stated as follows:

… if the welfare of the mother country necessarilly requires a sacrifice of the most natural rights of the colonie- their right to making their own laws, and disposing of their own property by representatives of their own choosing – if such is really the case between Great Britain and her Colonies, then the connexion between them OUGHT TO CEASE; and sooner or later, it must inevitably cease.

John Morin Scott was part of what Dorothy Rita Dillon refers to as the “New York Triumvirate” in her 1968 book of that title. The trio was comprised of John Morin Scott, William Livingston, and William Smith, Jr., each of whom was well educated,
affluent, and keenly interested in New York politics in the mid-eighteenth century. They shared a common background that included the “same school, same profession, same religion” and this made their “political cooperation almost inevitable.” 64 The triumvirate represented the privileged class of New York and seemed “destined for distinguished careers in public service.” 65

During this period, New York was known as a major trading center and was frequented by merchants and shopkeepers who were using the harbor to import and export goods to other Colonies as well as other countries. 66 It was John Morin Scott and his colleagues who recognized the significance politics would play in the economic growth and development of the city and surrounding area. It was this understanding that a connection existed between politics and the economy that John Morin Scott shared with Samuel Adams. It was the “magnetic power of self-interest that influenced attitudes” in New York at this time. 67 Self-interest was a motivating factor in building New York into a center of intercolonial trade as well as a hub of the organized resistance movement. While New York had a strong Loyalist contingency, the economic impact of the various taxation policies was felt by all residents regardless of their political affiliation.

John Morin Scott was described by Judge Thomas Jones, a member of the New York Supreme Court prior to the American Revolution, as “honest, open, and generous, a good lawyer, a fluent speaker, and a man possessing honor and integrity, and a free and engaging disposition.” 68 These characteristics made him a popular figure and well respected in the legal and political community. It would be his integrity and strong
belief in the Colonies’ right to self-rule that would cause John Morin Scott to become involved in the independence movement, despite his distain for mob activities and violence. Scott did not initially approve of many of the tactics utilized by the Sons of Liberty, such as intimidation and physical threats, as he believed that he could use his “learning and training in the law to advance their social and political position in provincial affairs.”

It was his legal training that would form the basis of John Morin Scott’s opposition to the Stamp Act as well as the Townshend Acts, for in his legal opinion, these taxation policies were considered to be an internal tax and thus, illegal. Scott did not question the legality of Parliament to impose external taxes, but he could not accept an internal tax that was an infringement on the rights of the Colonists. Livingston and Smith were also strongly opposed to the Stamp Act and “never wavered in that opposition though they might differ as to the methods to be employed against the mother country.”

The influence of John Morin Scott and the other members of the New York Triumvirate was embodied by their support of the Non-Importation Agreement and their ability to mobilize merchants and traders to participate in the Agreement. It was at the Stamp Act Congress held in New York where representatives agreed to adopt a policy of non-importation and to draft and send “protests against the illegal legislation to the home government.” The Non-Importation Agreement was critical to conveying to Great Britain not only the Colonies’ opposition to the Stamp Act, but also their ability to work collectively. Support from John Morin Scott was key to the success of the Non-
Importation Agreement as he was well respected and the Agreement was only successful if all of the stakeholders participated. This was a difficult task considering that the commercial culture of New York at this time was dominated by self-interest and individuals seeking to build fortunes.  

The collaboration among merchants that occurred in support of the Non-Importation Agreement and the burgeoning resistance activities led to the development of an organized movement in New York. Accounts and stories of activities perpetrated by the Sons of Liberty became more prevalent in newspapers and “gained more and more attention.” It was during this period of unrest that “the more radical elements of the population in New York and in other Colonies as well, had given some form to their activities and something approaching an organized society was coming into existence.”

John Morin Scott and the Sons of Liberty in New York were responsible for sustaining and shaping the organized resistance movement by presenting a unified opposition to the Stamp Act. While the origins of the Sons of Liberty have been attributed to both Boston and New York, it seemed that “New Yorkers certainly appeared unanimous in their decisions, and even tended to lead the other Colonies, a fact admitted by their neighbors at a later date.” Outwardly, the New York Sons of Liberty may have appeared cohesive, but within the group there was tension between members who advocated for passive resistance and those members who were interested in active resistance. John Morin Scott was a leader within the Sons of Liberty who preferred passive resistance.
The organized resistance movement was also sustained through intercolonial communication either via newspapers or personal correspondence. The New York leaders including John Morin Scott recognized that the movement would need to broaden to other Colonies in order to possess sufficient leverage with Great Britain. Correspondence and newspaper accounts spread news regarding activities of the Sons of Liberty and encouraged other groups to pursue similar tactics.

Scott also contributed to the organized resistance movement through his writings and his representation of the legal position of the Colonies. He was part of the committee that drafted and presented instructions to the New York legislature requesting that the Stamp Act be repealed and that the Colonies be able to adjudicate claims and employ self-rule, as they had done previously. He was also linked to and served as counsel for Alexander McDougall, a “renowned Son of Liberty” and Scott had dealings with John Lamb and Isaac Sears, both of whom were noted leaders of the New York Sons of Liberty. While John Morin Scott remained uncomfortable with the violent tactics of the Sons of Liberty, his support for the independence movement did not falter as he “continued to associate himself with this radical group at critical junctures, however, and to lend his oratorical powers to the cause of direct action.”

**John Lamb: True Member of the Sons of Liberty and New York Correspondent**

John Lamb was also a leader of the Sons of Liberty in New York and was a liquor dealer by trade. He was considered a true member of the Sons of Liberty having worked his way up from “humble circumstance.” John Lamb was considered a “New York radical” which included Isaac Sears and Alexander McDougall, as noted by Roger
J. Champagne in his article, *New York's Radicals and the Coming of Independence.*

The New York Sons of Liberty were recognized as the “true tribunes of the people of the American Revolution” as “they believed that the revolutionary movement was a mighty force which by sweeping old institutions before it, was making way for a new democratic society.”

As noted earlier, New York during the period of 1765-1776 was becoming the center of intercolonial trade in New England and was concurrently becoming the “central post from which communications were dispatched, to and from the east, and to the south as far as Maryland.” The New York Sons of Liberty utilized these lines of communication to their advantage and it was John Lamb, a key figure in the organized resistance movement, who was able to mobilize the residents to participate in resistance activities through his personal and public correspondence.

John Lamb was different from the other key figures that have been profiled because he was not classically educated and did not come from a privileged background. His father was English and his mother was Dutch and while Lamb attempted to follow his father into a career as an optician, he did not pursue it diligently and found business and the liquor trade more to this taste. Despite his lack of a formal education, Lamb was noted to be a “fluent speaker, and a forcible and ready writer” and “his style of composition was bold and nervous.” His disposition was such that he possessed an “ardent temper, yet cool in the formation and execution of important designs; of undaunted courage and indomitable perseverance.”
These characteristics contributed to John Lamb being a significant figure in mobilizing support for the Sons of Liberty and the organized resistance movement in New York. It was through his correspondence that he was able to raise awareness regarding the activities of the Sons of Liberty and inspire other chapters to engage in the movement. His personal correspondence included letters to other chapters of the Sons of Liberty in Philadelphia, Boston, and Charleston.  

John Lamb would also create public correspondence in the form of handbills and letters published in newspapers that would delineate Great Britain’s threat to the civil liberties of the Colonists. Handbills authored by “A. Plebian” and “A. Mechanic,” which outlined the injustices conducted by Parliament, have been attributed to John Lamb.

Through his correspondence, John Lamb was also able to keep the momentum of the movement moving forward and continue to encourage residents to support the Sons of Liberty despite the ever present possibility of prosecution by the ministry’s agents within the colony. It was because of the “intrepidity” exhibited by John Lamb and other prominent Sons of Liberty, and their fervent passion to protect the Colonists’ civil liberties that “the spirit of the masses was aroused.” The rhetoric within Lamb’s correspondence was such that “the people were excited to oppose all efforts to enslave them.”

An example of John Lamb’s leadership can be found in the proceedings of a meeting of the New York Sons of Liberty held on December 17, 1773, during which Lamb addressed the attendees and shared correspondence that he had received from the Boston Sons of Liberty outlining the injustices contained within the Townshend Acts.

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The New York Sons of Liberty drafted a response which included the reasoning behind their frustration with the Townshend Acts and the central issue of a lack of representation for the Colonies in Parliament.

And thus they, from time immemorial, have exercised the right of giving to, or withholding from the Crown, their aids and subsidies, according to their own free will and pleasure, signified by their representative in Parliament, do by the act in question, deny us, their brethren in America, the enjoyment of the same right. 595

Lastly, through his correspondence, John Lamb encouraged collaboration among the Colonies and advocated for a unified approach to force Great Britain to repeal the Stamp Act. In a letter to the Sons of Liberty in Philadelphia, Lamb indicates that they are aware of merchant in Philadelphia who is not abiding by the Non-Importation Agreement and that this merchant has the potential to “poison” the community. 596 Lamb continues to reinforce the necessity of a collaborative approach to the Stamp Act and the importance of Philadelphia’s response by saying, “it therefore greatly depends upon your conduct, whether the people of America shall remain free, or become the most vile and abject slaves.” 597 Lamb was also known to engage in “active correspondence with the patriots of the other Colonies, and aided their labors to keep up the ardor of opposition to the encroachments of the ministry.” 598 His correspondence traveled to the southern Colonies as well where clubs and chapters in Maryland, Virginia, and Georgia were informed of activities in New York and inspired to continue their opposition activities.

Under the leadership of John Lamb and with the support of John Morin Scott, the New York Sons of Liberty played a vital role in the organized resistance movement that
led to the American Revolution. The spirit of the revolutionary movement evolved from one of reconciliation to independence as leaders began to recognize that Great Britain’s intention was to utilize the Colonies to generate revenue and to limit their economic growth so that they would remain dependent on the mother country. Just as Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and John Morin Scott understood the connection between economics and politics, so did John Lamb and the other New York Sons of Liberty. These “bold spirits” would not accept illegal taxation and “pledged cooperation to their brethren” and were “determined not to be outdone, in any act of zeal, in defence of their constitutional rights.”

It was this zeal and “indomitable resolution” possessed by John Lamb that made him a significant figure in the New York Sons of Liberty. Lamb and his fellow rebels were considered “the most ardent of the associated Sons of Liberty, men who danger could not appal.” This lack of fear and disregard for potential consequences, such as prosecution, made the activities of Lamb complement the rhetoric of the Sons of Liberty leaders who were focused on the legality of Stamp Act and favored passive resistance.

The organized resistance movement as embodied by the Sons of Liberty played a critical role in shifting the mentality of Colonists from reconciliation with Great Britain to independence. While a majority of the leaders within the Sons of Liberty remained anonymous, there were several key figures which had a significant impact on the development and expansion of the resistance movement. These individuals were from varying backgrounds and social status, but they all shared a devotion to the revolutionary cause and a desire for Great Britain to address the grievances of the Colonists. The
primary issue in regard to the Stamp Act was the taxation of the Colonies without representation in Parliament. There were many individuals who contributed to the development and expansion of the Sons of Liberty yet these four men, Samuel Adams, John Morin Scott, John Lamb, and John Hancock, instigated and sustained the movement during the pre-revolutionary period of 1765-1776.

It is important to study these individuals when examining the impact of the organized resistance movement on the American Revolution and early manifestations of the American identity because they embodied several characteristics that would become components of the American identity. Among those characteristics was a desire to protect individual liberties and to participate in a representative system. While each of the individuals profiled has had a unique role within the Sons of Liberty, they shared a devotion to the cause of liberty and the right of the Colonies to self-rule.

It was the ability of these individuals to motivate and to mobilize residents to participate in opposition activities in response to the Stamp Act that led to its repeal. Adams, Hancock, Scott, and Lamb were also responsible for sustaining the movement and encouraging the formation of additional clubs and chapters of the Sons of Liberty in other cities besides Boston and New York. Without their leadership, the movement may have been confined to these two cities and not spread to the other Colonies and broadened its base of support. Finally, these men were instrumental in shaping the resistance movement through their rhetoric and political organization. These key leaders of the Sons of Liberty and their quest for independence influenced the development of
certain aspects of the American identity, specifically the American core values of liberty and democracy.
CHAPTER 4

TACTICS Employed BY THE SONS OF LIBERTY

When examining the influence of the Sons of Liberty on the development of certain aspects of the American identity, it is important to understand the tactics employed by the organized resistance movement within the North American Colonies and how these activities contributed to the onset of the American Revolution. Utilizing both violent and non-violent tactics, the organized resistance movement embodied by the Sons of Liberty was able to unify Colonists in opposition to the Stamp Act, to motivate Colonists to pursue independence rather than reconciliation with Great Britain, and to generate a sense of nationalism that would lead to the emergence of a national identity.

Inspired by a desire to defend their civil liberties and to protect their economic position, Colonists began to identify with the ideals of the organized resistance movement and to develop a sense of nationalism that was based upon separation from Great Britain.

During 1765-1776, many factors affected the relationship between Great Britain and its North American Colonies among them were the enforcement of remote rule and the Parliamentary Acts targeted at raising revenue from the Colonies through taxation. These two issues threatened the political and economic autonomy of the North American Colonies and further fueled their desire to break free from their subservient position in relation to Great Britain. Colonists had originally sought reconciliation with Great Britain, but during the period of the 1765-1776, it became evident that Parliament was going to proceed with its taxation policies and that a sense of nationalism was spreading.
throughout the Colonies. An identity was being formed in the North American Colonies that centered upon democratic rule and the right to economic prosperity. Within this context, the Sons of Liberty developed into an intercolonial organization that saw itself as embodying the spirit of liberty, which resonated with citizens seeking freedom from unjust government control.

The Sons of Liberty employed a number of tactics to undermine British policies that they perceived to be unconstitutional. They applied both aggressive and passive measures to persuade Great Britain that it could not enforce the Stamp Act within the Colonies. The non-violent tactics included economic and political pressure with the former usually being in the form of boycotts, as outlined by the Non-Importation Agreement. Applying economic pressure proved to be highly effective because it was not limited to one segment of the population as measures were taken on both an individual and group level, whether it was a woman choosing to not purchase linen from London or a group of merchants refusing to utilize the prescribed stamped paper to conduct business. The appeal of preserving individual civil liberties and protecting opportunities for economic growth and development crossed social and economic classes.

Political pressure was wielded by the Sons of Liberty in several Colonies as the organization was able to orchestrate the election of club leaders as well as sympathetic club members into the local Assembly or legislative body. While members in political positions were not able to supersede the authority of Parliamentary agents, they were able to vocalize in a public venue the threat posed by the Revenue Acts and the
consequences of not resisting the imposition of remote rule. By utilizing the local legislature as a vehicle to debate the constitutionality of the internal tax and to promote the idea of independence, the Sons of Liberty were able to engage in what was historically the sphere of the affluent and educated classes. Through these non-violent tactics of economic and political pressure what had been a mob-driven rebellion acquired more legitimacy and was recognized as a coordinated resistance movement based upon preserving the constitutional rights of the Colonists.

Another non-violent tactic employed by the Sons of Liberty to unify Colonists around the common goal of having the Stamp Act repealed and to shift the Colonists’ mindset from reconciliation to separation from Great Britain was the use of newspapers, handbills, broadsides, and live town and club meetings. The primary purpose of these materials was to educate Colonists on the infringements made by Great Britain. These materials and the groups’ live meetings were essential to raising awareness, to generating support, and to mobilizing the Colonists at the local level to participate in the organized resistance movement.

Although these non-violent tactics did prove successful in some respects, it was their use of intimidation and mob violence for which the Sons of Liberty are often identified. Mob activities organized by the Sons of Liberty were often directed towards an individual who represented Parliamentary authority, and while the activities might have appeared to be spontaneous and uncontrolled in nature, they were actually coordinated and examples of planned mass violence.¹ There were commonalities among the various accounts of intimidation such as burning an individual in effigy, vandalism.
of property, and coercion and terrorization. These noisy demonstrations or street theatre would prove effective in intimidating the targeted individual as well as stimulating the mob and rioters. The Sons of Liberty were known to have befriended established rival gangs in order to unite the various factions against representatives of Great Britain.

**Economic and Political Tactics: The Use of Boycotts and the Legislature**

The effect of the Sons of Liberty on the revolution was multi-faceted. The Sons of Liberty chose to “strike at the mother country where it was most vulnerable” by encouraging a boycott of British products. Recognizing that Great Britain was in need of revenue to offset the expenses of its standing army and war debt, the Sons of Liberty applied economic pressure in the form of boycotts.

The boycott of British goods was a significant component of the Non-Importation Agreement or associations proposed by the Sons of Liberty and which began to form following the passage of Townshend Acts of 1768. The Townshend Acts included several provisions that placed a duty on specific British goods such as glass and paper with the purpose of generating revenue from the Colonies. The Non-Importation Agreements prohibited citizens and merchants from purchasing or selling British goods. The Sons of Liberty were known to threaten and to assault citizens who violated the non-importation agreement. In her book, *From Resistance to Revolution Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776*, Pauline Maier contends that “non-importation was thus the successor of the Stamp Act resistance.”

The New York Sons of Liberty openly stated on July 7, 1769, in a broadside that
merchants and citizens who violated the Non-Importation Agreement would be subjected to economic pressure as stated in the following resolutions.

V. That we will not knowingly purchase from, nor fell, to any Person or Persons who shall violate the Non-importation Agreement.

VI. That we will neither let Houses to, nor hire them from. That we will not employ, nor be employed by, nor in anywise hold Connection in Trade with, those who violate the Agreement, or with such as shall Countenance their base Conduct, by dealing with them.  

Samuel Adams, recognized leader of the Sons of Liberty in the Boston area, inspired residents to participate in the Non-Importation Agreement with his argument “that such resistance was both legal and morally justified,” and that “England viewed the Colonies as different from the realm: not equals, but subordinates.”  The Non-Importation Agreement conveyed to Parliament that the Colonies’ could unite in their opposition to what was perceived to be violations of their constitutional rights. It was Adams who prescribed that “protests must be carefully orchestrated” and it was under his leadership that “petitions, boycotts, and well-designed campaigns would be the chief components of popular protests in Boston.”  

Another component of the Non-Importation Agreement was the ban on purchasing or drinking British tea that carried a duty. While the Daughters of Liberty were brewing Liberty Tea, the Sons of Liberty were observing a strict boycott of British tea and notifying citizens that it was their patriotic duty to do the same. As stated in a broadside printed in New York on November 29, 1773, the Sons of Liberty of New York
skillfully connected the economic pressure of the boycott with the quest for liberty and the American identity.

1ft. RESOLVED, that whoever shall aid, or abet, or in any Manner assist, in the Introduction of Tea, from any Place whatsoever, into this Colony, while it is subject by Britishe Act of Parliament, to the Payment of a Duty, for the Purpoſe of raising a Revenue in America, he shall be deemed, an Enemy to the Liberties of America….7

The Sons of Liberty consistently established a relationship between the duty on British goods such as tea and the threat it posed to citizens’ constitutional rights and liberties. Recognizing that the safety and security of property was a fundamental constitutional right and would impact the broad population, the Sons of Liberty proposed that once property rights were violated, Americans would subsequently lose their liberty because “if they succeed in the Sale of that Tea, we shall have no property that we can call our own, and then we may bid adieu to American Liberty.” 8

The safety and security of property was an issue of tremendous concern for the merchant class. Of the key figures within the organized resistance movement, it was John Hancock who had gained the “political position as leader of the important merchant faction,” and who had acted out of personal and professional self-interest in his support of the revolutionary movement.9 The preservation of property rights and ability to establish control over their economic growth and development and specifically, their intercolonial and foreign trade relationships, were key factors in motivating merchants to pursue separation from Great Britain. The activities of the Sons of Liberty consistently
reiterated the necessity of independence in order to protect the economic power of the Colonies and to ensure access to future markets.

The Non-Importation Agreement received strong support in Charleston under the guidance of the local Sons of Liberty, but it did not come without having an adverse effect on trade, which was a significant concern for the community. As in other cities, the non-importation agreement resulted in a loss of jobs, both skilled and unskilled labor, which put already impoverished families at a greater risk of becoming destitute. However, the preservation of individual liberties and a right to self-rule inspired many residents to support the organized resistance movement despite the economic liabilities it created.

The Sons of Liberty were also known to utilize the legislature to oppose regulatory acts imposed by Britain and to increase support for the American Revolution. Sam Adams was instrumental in the approval of Circular Letter “advocating for the Colonies to harmonize with each other” and made a plea for unity and cooperation. Political strategy was also employed, such as in Boston where Sam Adams and John Hancock were able to have “radicals” elected to the Massachusetts Assembly and the “Executive Council that governed the colony.” It was “out of concern about the growing English authority in Massachusetts,” that Sam Adams tirelessly advocated for individual civil rights and recruited friends to become politically active. His “crusade,” which was cloaked in logical debate and fiery rhetoric, resonated with intellectuals and the affluent, and if it had not been for the support of these specific
groups, the revolutionary movement would not have been sustained and led to independence. 14

Another example of the Sons of Liberty applying pressure through political channels occurred in South Carolina. The Charleston Sons of Liberty played a critical role in having artisan members elected to the Congress, where they were able to propose anti-British policies for consideration. 15 By utilizing the legislature to argue the unconstitutionality of the British Revenue Acts, the Sons of Liberty applied pressure in what was perceived as a more legitimate manner as compared to the episodes of mob violence and riots ascribed to the organization.

This type of influence was also wielded in New York where leaders of the Sons of Liberty were reported to have been involved with the slating and election of candidates sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. 16 Opposition to the Stamp Act and support for the Sons of Liberty were heard throughout the streets of New York, including through newspaper readings and ballads such “An Excellent New Song for the SONS OF LIBERTY in AMERICA by a Gentleman in the City of New York” which included thirteen stanzas and a chorus. 17

**Intimidation and Organized Mob Violence**

Another method utilized to undermine British policies was intimidation as the Sons of Liberty were noted for attacking “anyone who did not observe the ban” and for their “liberal use of tar and feathers.” 18 The Sons of Liberty were known to tar and feather selected Loyalists. 19 The Sons of Liberty were reported to have disrupted the “opening performance at a new Manhattan theater” in 1766, by proclaiming “Liberty!”
as “they dragged members of the audience into the street, ripped the wigs off theatergoers’ heads, and trashed the building.”  

Following this incident, the Tories labeled them the “Cudgel Boys” and reported that they would “bespoil the exteriors of shops that sold English goods” with the contents of the “backyard privies.”  

It was also in New York on November 1, 1765 that “flags were flown at half mast in mourning for the death of American liberty” in acknowledgement of the Stamp Act taking effect.

Open intimidation would take many forms, but as Middlekauf notes the mob activities in 1765 in Boston were common and “the action had become almost routine.”

A pattern developed that would be repeated in other cities including New Providence, Hartford, New York, and Philadelphia. The pattern would begin with a rumor circulated around the city identifying which official would be targeted by the mob. For example, a rumor circulated in Boston on August 26, 1765, that a local customs official would be targeted and that evening several Custom Commissioners were attacked and their homes destroyed including Benjamin Hallowell and William Story.

The circulation of a rumor would be followed by the creation of an effigy of the individual and the effigy would be hung, burned, decapitated and/or dragged through the streets by the mob. The mob would then proceed to the home or business establishment of the targeted official and vandalize their property. The degree of vandalism would vary from broken windows and kicking down doors to complete destruction as was the case of the home of Thomas Hutchinson which was “leveled to its Foundation.”

An effigy of George Grenville was hung from the Liberty Tree in Boston Common by the Sons of Liberty and “courts and custom houses had to close” due to intimidation by the
organization and its members. Another example of an individual being hung in effigy occurred in Charleston, where the local tax collector was targeted and resigned as a result of the threat. Similar to the attack on Thomas Hutchinson in Boston, Lt. Cadwallader Colden was threatened and an effigy of him was hung from the Liberty Tree in New York.

One of the notorious examples of the Sons of Liberty’s use of intimidation and mob violence was the attack on Andrew Oliver in Boston on August 14, 1765. Following the pattern just outlined, a rumor was circulated that Oliver was to be targeted that evening and an effigy was created and hung from what would be known as the Liberty Tree in the South End of Boston. A large mob carried his effigy through the streets that evening and vandalized his home, resulting in Oliver, the designated Stamp Distributor for Massachusetts, resigning the next day. As the mob marched through the streets, it is reported that they shouted, “Liberty, Property, and No Stamps!” and increased in size to approximately two thousand. This event demonstrated the ability of the Sons of Liberty to unify the Colonists around a common goal which was to resist enforcement of the Stamp Act and to work towards its repeal. Prior to this incident, the violence in Boston had been escalating and other incidents were noted, “where protests of angry workers, merchants, and sailors turned violent.”

Mob violence would also include a physical assault on the official which may entail a beating or punishment by tar and feathering. One Stamp Distributor in New Providence was forced into a coffin and buried alive until he agreed to resign.
the Sons of Liberty had Committees on Correspondence, it is reported that they also selected individuals to serve on a Committee for Tarring and Feathering.  

Samuel Adams, known for being an effective community organizer and supporter of the Non-Importation Agreement, was also responsible for inciting mob activities within the Boston area. His coordination of activities of the Sons of Liberty came from a realization that “he needed to rouse indignation over the taxes and turn theoretical arguments about government and liberty into battle cries.” These battle cries would prove effective in engendering support among and participation of the residents of Boston. He was a firm believer that the Colonists’ freedom was contingent upon their autonomy and ability to self-govern and self-tax.  

In addition to beatings and the use of tar and feathers, the Sons of Liberty were known to intimidate agents of the ministry by leading an angry and excited mob to their doorstep. It was not uncommon for the Sons of Liberty to “surround the houses of the royal Customs Commissioners at night, beating drums, blowing horns and uttering bloodcurdling Indian war whoops.” These tactics were often successful and the officials would resign shortly after being terrorized by the Sons of Liberty. Mobs were utilized to intimidate individuals who did not abide by the Non-Importation Agreement, as in the case of Theophilus Lilly. Lilly was a merchant in Boston who “broke the pledge” and his business was attacked by a mob “with a big wooden hand on a pole pointing to it accusingly.”  

The Sons of Liberty and their subsequent mob riots in New York had a lasting effect on the revolutionary movement as “it steadily and systematically increased the
power of the people, and as steadily sapped the foundations of the government.”  

The Sons of Liberty of New York did not meet in secret rather they would often post advertisements with the date, time, and location of upcoming their meeting in order to encourage greater participation by the public, as seen in an advertisement from December 16, 1773.  

The New York chapter of the Sons of Liberty would use inflammatory language to generate engagement and to solicit a response from both the public and the British officials, as exemplified in their Resolutions of July 27, 1774, “14. RESOLVED, That the best Way of approving our Loyalty, is spit in the said King’s Face, as that may be the Means of opening his Eyes.”  

It was the Sons of Liberty in New York under the leadership of John Lamb that declared their intent to use a “vigor beyond the law” to force the repeal of the Stamp Act.  

A riot planned by the New York Sons of Liberty destroyed the property of Major James, an agent of the ministry, on November 1, 1765.  

This “outbreak of violence” was justified by the Sons of Liberty because it represented a “true loyalty” to preserving their constitutional rights.  

Another example of mob violence in New York occurred in April 1775 when the Sons of Liberty went in search of Myles Cooper, the loyalist President of King’s College.  

Cooper would have been subjected to the wrath of the mob had it not been for Alexander Hamilton, a student at King’s College at the time, who “delayed the mob with a lengthy speech.”  

During Hamilton’s speech, Cooper was able to escape to a British frigate.  

Hamilton, a member of the ‘Hearts of Oak’ volunteer militia in New York, was “committed to the revolutionary cause,” but it was President Cooper who had
admitted Hamilton to King’s College “under special status” after he had been rejected by other institutions such as Princeton. Hamilton, an orphan born in the West Indies, “possessed neither family nor wealth nor dependable social connections to ease his way.”

The thought that the Sons of Liberty were justified in their actions supported various violent incidents as “certain sections of the population resolved to resort to the sword,” in their opposition to British policies. The violent imagery proposed by the New York Sons of Liberty often evoked an emotional response, such as when the group “swore that they would prevent the landing of British troops in New York, and that they would fight ‘up to their knees in blood’ rather than allow the Stamp Act to be enforced.”

Mob violence was not limited to New York and Boston as incidents occurred in Newport, Philadelphia, and Charleston. In Charleston, the Sons of Liberty were reported to have stolen ammunition in order to support their movement and their artisan chapter members developed arms that could be used in mob activities and against British forces.

The Sons of Liberty negotiated with organized gangs and absorbed other organizations into their network and encouraged them to utilize their power to resist the British. The Loyal Nine, who would transition into the Sons of Liberty, were known to have persuaded the North and South End mobs of Boston to participate in the assault on Andrew Oliver, which became known as the riot of August 14, 1765. The key figures of the Sons of Liberty such as Samuel Adams proved to be charismatic organizers who possessed the ability to motivate and inspire other groups to align with the Sons of
Liberty in opposition to the Stamp Act of 1765. Adams was able to “unite them into a single powerful armed force.”

Middlekauf notes that Sam Adams was part of the Caucus Club, a well-established political organization that became a part of the Sons of Liberty during 1765. The Sons of Liberty were present in Savannah, Georgia and went by the title “the Amicable Society” and observed the Non-Importation Agreement up to its ban on the importation of slaves. The presence and absorption of these various groups into the Sons of Liberty demonstrates the momentum around creating a united organized resistance and “the idea of regularizing intercolonial cooperation against the Stamp Act.”

This momentum and development of an intercolonial organization resulted in a climate of intolerance and the various forms of intimidation discussed prevented Loyalists from publicly supporting British policies. As the mindset of residents and leaders within the Colonies began to shift from reconciliation to independence, agents of the ministry and other individuals with Loyalist tendencies were ostracized from the community and some chose to emigrate to Great Britain.

Raising Awareness through Printed Materials and Live Meetings

Another tactic the Sons of Liberty employed was to utilize newspapers and printed correspondence to generate support for the revolutionary movement and to criticize British rule and Parliamentary Acts. Handbills, advertisements, and newspaper pieces would often promote the activities of the Sons of Liberty and encourage the public to become engaged in the revolutionary movement in order to preserve their
individual liberties. Communications from the Sons of Liberty would attempt to convey the urgency of the issue and the significance of events such as the Tea Act as shown in the opening lines of this communication from the Sons of Liberty in New York on July 7, 1769.

At this alarming Crisis when we are threatened with a Deprivation of those invaluable Rights, which our Ancestors purchased with their Blood ---Rights, which as Men, we derive from Nature; as Englishmen, have secured to us by our excellent Constitution; and which once torn from us, will in all Probability never be restored.60

It was not uncommon for a newspaper publisher to be a member of the local Sons of Liberty and as a result specific newspapers were more supportive of their movement and activities. For example, the publishers of the Boston Gazette, Benjamin Edes and John Gill, were reported to be members of the Loyal Nine in Boston which became a part of the Sons of Liberty.61 In New York, the “principal organ of the Sons of Liberty” was the New York Gazette and Weekly Postboy.62 Utilizing the press was an effective method of keeping the revolutionary movement moving forward and reaching a broad audience as Maier contends, “the central preoccupation of the Sons of Liberty, and later of the revolutionary movement in general, was then with winning a mass base, with converting the population at large into sons of liberty.”63

Newspapers were not only vehicles for sharing information related to the activities of various chapters of the Sons of Liberty, but they were also utilized to debate the merits of separation from Great Britain over reconciliation. In Charleston, printer Charles Couch issued the South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal in October 1768
“containing the resolves of the tradesmen in New York and the news from Boston deprecating the Townshend Act.” 64 By publishing writings by Sam Adams and John Lamb, newspapers such as South Carolina Gazette and the Charleston Gazette contributed to the independence discussion that had been occurring at town meetings, under Liberty Trees, and in taverns throughout the Colonies. The publication of editorials calling for a united opposition to British policies and dramatic stunts such as including on the front page a “funeral lamentation on the death of dear liberty” as done by The New York Gazette and Weekly Post Boy in 1765 added to the growing discontent present in the Colonies and supported the revolutionary movement. 65 The press was responsible for sustaining the support of Alexander McDougall, incarcerated for his activities related to the Sons of Liberty, who wrote prodigious quantities of letters and essays while in prison. 66

The Sons of Liberty contributed a great deal of the correspondence to the sympathetic newspapers and drafted handbills for distribution that would promote upcoming meetings or present resolutions passed at various meetings. Sam Adams was known for his considerable contributions and possessed an ability to make “liberty seem a tangible thing, a sort of wonderful treasure that needed constant protection.” 67 He has been referred to as a “propagandist who stoked the passions of the poor and built resentment against the British to further his own career.” 68 Adams’ body of work demonstrates his devotion to protecting civil liberties and his concern over the infringement of Britain’s taxation policies, as seen in his instructions for Boston’s representatives to protest the Stamp Act in the Massachusetts’s Assembly. 69 His
instructions “became a widely read manifesto on colonial rights,” and his rhetoric was widely published in the Colonies and “gave readers retorts to every loyalist claim.”

In his work, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776*, Bernard Bailyn compiled an extension collection of pamphlets from this period in American History that convey the revolutionary fervor and the rhetoric of leaders such as Samuel Adams and John Hancock. Bailyn notes that pamphlets produced during this period contained “much of the most important and characteristic writing of the American Revolution.”

The primary objective of American pamphlets was to persuade the public to recognize the importance of “political liberty” using a logical approach so that “the reader is led through arguments, not images.”

During the smuggling trial of John Hancock, Samuel Adams drafted accounts of the proceedings and published them in the *Journal of Occurrences* which resulted in Hancock’s “national prominence as a martyred hero for what patriots now universally called ‘the cause’.” The trial was an attempt by Governor Bernard to quash the Sons of Liberty and the organized resistance movement by eliminating their basis for financial support, John Hancock and the House of Hancock. Bernard was unsuccessful in his attempt to prosecute John Hancock and his efforts actually resulted in greater support for the movement and increased publicity regarding the seizure of Hancock’s ship, the *Liberty*.

The Sons of Liberty were also known to use town meetings and mass meetings either held under the local Liberty Tree or in a designated field as a way to generate support and enthusiasm for the independence movement and to stimulate a sense of
nationalism. These meetings were often open to any true patriot and would serve as an opportunity to share correspondence from other chapters and to educate residents on the implications of the various Acts and the consequences for not engaging in the opposition movement. A handbill attributed to John Lamb and published on December 16, 1766, was critical of a Parliamentary Act related to issuing bills of credit and “closed with the call of a meeting in the fields to take the sense of the people on the occasion.” Sam Adams recognized the importance of the Colonists’ ability to assemble and to self-govern and he expressed great concern that “town meetings would lose their authority, and they could end up without any political power,” and “in fact, they could easily become slaves.”

It was not uncommon for the local Sons of Liberty to hold meetings at a designated tavern or inn. As noted previously, taverns served as the communication hub and gathering place for the local community. During meetings such as those led by John Lamb of the New York Sons of Liberty, correspondence and pamphlets outlining the latest activities would be read to participants. Specifically in Boston, “taverns were the true cradle of the American Revolution,” and several events related to the onset of the American Revolution, such as the Boston Tea Party, were planned during tavern meetings.

The tactics employed by the Sons of Liberty, whether they were violent or non-violent, were undertaken with the intention to influence the policies of Great Britain. Through these activities such as economic and political pressure, intimidation and organized violence, and the use of print pieces and live meetings, the organized
resistance movement was able to unify Colonists in opposition to the Stamp Act, to motivate Colonists to pursue independence rather than reconciliation with Great Britain, and to generate a sense of nationalism that would lead to the emergence of a national identity.

The Sons of Liberty inspired Colonists from various social and economic backgrounds to join the organized resistance movement and to pursue independence from Great Britain. The national identity that emerged was one based upon a preservation of individual liberties and a right to self-rule. What started as a movement to oppose the Stamp Act developed into a quest for independence and cultivated a sense of nationalism. Colonists began to identify with the ideals of the organized resistance movement and participated in the non-violent and violent tactics employed by the Sons of Liberty.

In addition to conveying a united front to Parliament in response to its Revenue Acts, the threat of violence and the various forms of intimidation were geared towards convincing those residents with Loyalist tendencies that they should shift alliances from Great Britain to that of the colonial resistance movement. While the repeal of the Stamp Act has been attributed to the Sons of Liberty and their tactics of intimidation and mob violence, there is little evidence to support the claim that a significant number of Loyalists were persuaded to join the organized resistance movement. As a result of the mob activities, a majority of the designated Stamp Distributors did resign their positions and Loyalists were uncomfortable expressing their views in public due to the threat of violence.
The Sons of Liberty were initially formed in reaction to the Stamp Act, and during its height of activity during 1765-1776 the group became an embodiment of the revolutionary movement and fed the development of a national identity. The Sons of Liberty created a network throughout the Colonies that could be utilize to oppose British rule, yet the individual chapters maintained their autonomy. While the structure of the various chapters remained loose and variable, the Sons of Liberty were an initial attempt at intercolonial collaboration. 79 The Sons of Liberty had chapters in each of the thirteen Colonies and their membership was comprised of working-class mechanics, artisans, and tradesmen. The Sons of Liberty utilized intimidation, mob violence, and propaganda to attack their targets which often were representatives of the Crown. The Sons of Liberty were successful in their efforts to have the Stamp Act repealed, but their impact on the American Revolution is more extensive as it provided a model for organized resistance and awakened a national identity that contributed to the Colonists’ quest for independence.
CONCLUSION
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND KEY FINDINGS

The American Revolution was not only comprised of several significant military battles, but it also represented a shift in political ideology that manifested itself in the emergence of a new nation.¹ Prior to the onset of the Revolution, the organized resistance movement was instrumental in unifying the Colonies around a common goal and demonstrating the value of intercolonial collaboration.² The purpose of this study was to examine the organized resistance movement as embodied by the Sons of Liberty to determine whether a connection existed between it and early manifestations of the American identity. The impetus for the Colonies’ quest for independence from Great Britain was a desire to be free from remote rule and to secure control over their economic growth and development. The War for Independence influenced the development of certain aspects of the American identity, such as the core values of liberty and democracy that have shaped the tenets of our society.

The relationship between Great Britain and its North American Colonies became significantly strained following the conclusion of the French and Indian War, when recognizing that it possessed considerable debt and seeking to identify an additional source of revenue, Great Britain passed several Parliamentary Acts that imposed taxes upon the Colonies.³ In addition to the taxation policies, Great Britain began to prosecute cases in the Vice Admiralty courts which were known to be unsympathetic to the Colonists and often decided in favor of the ministry.⁴ The utilization of the Vice
Admiralty courts was perceived to be an attempt by Great Britain to assume greater control over the Colonies’ judicial system and to eliminate the Colonies’ sense of autonomy and self-rule.

A series of Parliamentary Acts targeted at generating revenue as well as ensuring the Colonies’ economic dependence on Great Britain contributed to a sense of resentment and anger on the part of the North American Colonists. This resentment and anger derived from a perception that these Acts were unconstitutional and unfairly penalized the Colonists, who only initially desired to be treated like other British citizens. The first of the Parliamentary Acts was the Revenue Act of 1764, deemed the Sugar Act by the Colonists, and it imposed tariffs on items such as sugar, wine, and coffee. The Sugar Act also restricted the sale of American products including lumber and imposed greater enforcement of British policies, which had previously been more relaxed.

It was the Stamp Act of 1765 followed by the Townshend Acts that resulted in the emergence of the Sons of Liberty and the organized resistance movement. The Stamp Act required that all official documents be affixed with a stamp purchased from an official Stamp Distributor appointed by the ministry and the Act represented another example of Great Britain unfairly taxing the Colonies, who did not have representation in Parliament. The Townshend Acts were implemented shortly after repeal of the Stamp Act, and further limited the Colonies’ ability to self-regulate trade and the import and export of good and services.
Several issues contributed to the shift in political ideology from a desire to reconcile with Great Britain to a desire to seek independence and those were the constitutionality of the taxation policies, the Colonies’ political maturation which made their subordinate position to Great Britain unacceptable, and the undeniable potential for the Colonies’ economic growth and development that was suppressed by the trade limitations imposed by Great Britain. These issues culminated in an independence movement that generated a sense of nationalism centered around the quest to be free from tyranny and to protect individual liberties including a right to self-rule and to economic prosperity.

The emergence of the resistance movement in the North American Colonies was based upon an ideology that had influenced other significant uprisings in English history including the Glorious Revolution, and the Colonies’ quest for independence shared common characteristics with other resistance activities, such as the role of the magistrate, the timing and impetus for incidents, and the lack of civil authority at the time.⁹ The writings of political theorists, John Locke and Thomas Paine, were significant in shaping the tenets of the organized resistance movement, as they influenced prominent leaders and promoted individual civil liberties and the ideal of equality.¹⁰ The ideals of equality and self-rule, which were components of the Enlightenment period, are present within the framework of the Declaration of the Independence and certain aspects of the American identity.

There are varying opinions regarding the exact origin of the organized resistance movement in the North American Colonies as it has been reported that the Sons of
Liberty first appeared in New York as well as Boston. Regardless of the exact origin, the primary focus of the Sons of Liberty was to oppose the Stamp Act and to force its repeal. The organized resistance movement was present throughout the Colonies and developed into a collaborative effort to oppose the taxation acts, and it was their strength as a united force that posed the greatest threat to British rule and regulation.

Clubs and chapters of the Sons of Liberty were formed in both rural and urban areas and the membership was comprised of workingmen, artisans, craftsmen, and merchants. Some clubs met in secret so as to avoid prosecution while other clubs widely published resolutions passed at their meetings and advertised upcoming gatherings and activities. Membership was primarily limited to white males although free blacks and women were known to have participated in mob activities. While the size and fervor of the local Sons of Liberty may have varied from place to place, there were common characteristics present within the clubs such as a firm opposition to British policies perceived to be unconstitutional and a desire for active resistance rather than a passive approach. Another commonality among clubs was that groups would often meet at either a local tavern or under a designated Liberty Tree.

While the Sons of Liberty were the focus of this study, there were other revolutionary groups present during 1765-1776 that contributed to the resistance movement such as the Daughters of Liberty and local unorganized gangs. Gangs were primarily based in urban areas including Boston and were not “true” Sons of Liberty because their focus was on personal gain rather a political purpose. The Daughters of Liberty were known to support the movement by exerting pressure via their sphere of
influence within the home as well as the local market. Daughters of Liberty were reported to have boycott British goods such as tea and fabric, thus relying on their own devices to brew alternative tea and to create homespun clothing.  

It was the leaders of the Sons of Liberty specifically in the cities of Boston and New York that were instrumental in the expansion of the movement and broadened the membership base of the organization. In the Boston area, Samuel Adams and John Hancock each played a critical role in motivating and mobilizing groups of residents to oppose the Stamp Act. These individuals were also able to sustain the movement whether it was through financial support or various strategies of community organization. Samuel Adams and John Hancock shaped the resistance movement and were critical to its success not only in the Boston area, but throughout the Colonies.

Samuel Adams has been labeled as a rebel, propagandist, and failed businessman, yet historians seem to agree that he was an excellent debater, well-skilled community organizer, and dedicated to ensuring that the citizens of Boston were treated fairly and that their civil liberties were protected from Great Britain. Adams explored several occupations before recognizing that he was passionate about politics and that he could not ignore the injustices being imposed by Great Britain and the long term consequences of failing to fight for the Colonists right to liberty and to participate in a representative system. Sam Adams served as a tax collector, brewer, and considered a religious career before settling down to focus upon the organized resistance movement in the Boston area.
Another key leader in the Sons of Liberty within the Boston area was John Hancock, as he provided financial support to the group as well as nurtured the participation of merchants in opposing the Stamp Act. The involvement of merchants and the affluent represented a shift in perception regarding the Sons of Liberty, and it encouraged residents who might not have participated in the activities previously to consider joining the organized resistance movement. John Hancock was known to be very wealthy and through his support of the movement and of the impoverished within Boston, he was highly regarded for his generosity and his guidance in matters related to trade and economic affairs. Hancock was somewhat eccentric for this period as he enjoyed wearing fashionable clothing and did not marry, rather he lived with his aunt in the Hancock’s home, Beacon Hill.

The other primary hub of activity of the Sons of Liberty was New York and two recognized leaders in this area were John Lamb and John Morrin Scott. It is important to note that the key figures highlighted did not operate in a vacuum and there were a number of club members whose devotion to the patriot cause resulted in the resistance movement being successful. John Morin Scott was a popular lawyer in New York, the son of a wealthy merchant, and a firm believer that Parliament’s taxation policies were internal taxes and thus illegal. He was not comfortable with many of the violent tactics employed by the Sons of Liberty, yet he supported the movement because he could not accept Great Britain’s illegal taxation of the Colonies. As in Boston and other cities, the Non-Importation Agreement was critical to conveying to Great Britain not only the Colonies’ opposition to the Stamp Act, but also their ability to work
collectively. Support from John Morin Scott was crucial to the success of the Non-Importation Agreement as he was well respected and could garner participation by other merchants and traders.

John Lamb was a liquor dealer by trade and had become successful through hard work and perseverance as he lacked a formal education and did not come from a wealthy family. Despite not having attended a prestigious university, Lamb was a talented writer and was known to have written both private and public correspondence that motivated residents to support the Sons of Liberty and to mobilize these supporters to participate in mob activities upon demand. There are several broadsides that document Lamb’s role in leading meetings of the New York Sons of Liberty and his role in developing a collaborative approach to oppose the Stamp Act, which led to an intercolonial organized resistance movement.

The last aspect of this study included an examination of the tactics employed by the organized resistance movement within the North American Colonies and how the Sons of Liberty were able to unify Colonists in opposition to the Stamp Act, to motivate Colonists to pursue independence rather than reconciliation with Great Britain, and to generate a sense of nationalism that led to the emergence of a national identity. The organized resistance movement utilized both violent and non-violent tactics in an attempt to influence the policies of Great Britain. The non-violent tactics included economic pressure in the form of boycotts and the Non-Importation Agreement as well as political pressure exerted when a leader or sympathetic club member was elected to a position in local government. It was for their more violent activities that the Sons of
Liberty are often noted such as their use of threats, vandalism, mob riots, and physical assaults of representatives of the British ministry. Assaults typically included the use of tar and feathers and resulted in the resignation of the official, thus encouraging other chapters or clubs to mimic these activities. The Sons of Liberty were also known to negotiate with other gangs and absorb other groups into their fold in order to increase their size and presence. A significant component of their strategy was to broaden the base of their membership so that it would be more difficult for Great Britain to enforce its Parliamentary Acts.

The Sons of Liberty were also able to motivate Colonists to pursue independence through their use of printed materials and live meetings. Through their correspondence the Sons of Liberty would attempt to convey the urgency of the issue and the significance of not participating in the resistance movement by delineating how the Parliamentary Acts threatened the liberties and freedoms possessed by the Colonists. It was through newspapers and town meetings that the local Sons of Liberty would learn about the activities of other clubs and chapters. The sharing of information was very important in supporting the development of a network for the organized resistance movement and of a unified, collaborative approach to opposition activities.

**Value and Relevance of Study**

The value of this study can be found in its examination of the organized resistance movement present within the North American Colonies during 1765-1776 and the movement’s connection to the development of certain aspects of the American identity. In an attempt to provide a well-rounded analysis, the study was comprised of
the following four sections: emergence of the organized resistance movement, the origins, membership, and presence of the movement, key figures in the cities of Boston and New York, and tactics employed by the Sons of Liberty. Each section contains both primary and secondary sources to support the evaluation of the Sons of Liberty and their influence on the Colonies’ quest for independence.

The study also relates the activities of the Sons of Liberty, whether it was their ability to motivate Colonists to oppose the Stamp Act or to sustain the organized resistance movement following the repeal of the Stamp Act, to the emergence of a sense of nationalism and early manifestations of the American identity. The events that contributed to the development of the organized resistance movement were the enactment of several Parliamentary Acts aimed at both economic gain for Great Britain as well as imposing a more commanding presence over the Colonies’ trade practices and local governance. These factors led to the onset of the American Revolution and resulted in the North American Colonies gaining independence from Great Britain.

The relevance of this study can be found in its contributions to the current literature on the Sons of Liberty as well as studies on the formation of the American identity. Through the examination of the organized resistance movement within the North American Colonies and its emergence, presence, and tactics that influenced the onset of the American Revolution, it seems that a connection does exist between the quest for independence and early manifestations of the American identity.

The organized resistance movement as embodied by the Sons of Liberty was able to develop a network of clubs and chapters throughout the North American Colonies and
to unify Colonists in opposition to the Stamp Act. The intercolonial collaboration that occurred through the Sons of Liberty would serve as a model for resistance activities during the American Revolution. The Sons of Liberty were initially formed to unite the Colonists in opposition to the Stamp Act and to force its repeal, but their contributions to the organized resistance movement led to the onset of the American Revolution and the emergence of a sense of nationalism. As Colonists embraced the independence movement as embodied by the Sons of Liberty, their sense of nationalism grew and developed into early manifestations of the American identity. It was the Sons of Liberty quest for independence that led to the formation of the United States and the emergence of an American identity; an identity that valued democracy and an individual’s right to liberty.
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