

*Contagion:**Riots and Resignations*

WHEN THE PEOPLE of Boston began to pull down houses, they transformed the debate over Parliamentary authority into a test of Parliamentary power. What they challenged on Kilby Street, on August 14, was not simply the authority of Parliament—that was a matter for the colonial assemblies and the Stamp Act Congress—but the ability of Parliament to enforce the authority it claimed. For a few days after taking the step, they must have wondered whether they would stand alone. If so, if one colony alone rebelled, the power of Parliament would surely be too much for it. If all rebelled together, it might not be so easy for the English lawmakers to demonstrate their absolute authority.

Boston had to wonder for only a few days. Before two weeks were out, Rhode Island, the pariah of New England, which had helped save Massachusetts from the Pequots a hundred and thirty years before, again came to her rescue. As soon as news of the attack on Andrew Oliver reached Newport, the conservatives there began to hear rumors that their effigies would hang on August 27, as Oliver's had hung on August 14. What would follow the hanging they might guess for themselves. They knew the men who were planning the affair and expostulated with them. They even pleaded with the Governor to prevent it, but all in vain.¹ On August 26, the day before it was to take place, Martin Howard, Jr., appealed to the public, through an advertisement in the *Mercury*, defending his right to speak and publish his opinions and expressing his surprise "at the mistaken notions of those, who, under a Pretence of

serv[ing] the Cause of Liberty, would take away the Right of private Judgment, and stop the Avenues to Truth, by instigating the Populace, and endeavouring to point their Fury against the Person and Interest of a Man, meerly because he happens to differ in Opinion from his Countrymen." The advertisement went on to say, "The Writer does not retract any Position contained in the *Halfifax Letter*; and therefore does not meanly solicit any Favour or Exemption from the Abuse intended him, because if his Person and Interests become the Objects of popular Revenge for these Sentiments, he thinks he shall never lament the Cause, whatever may be the Consequences." Howard was nothing if not proud, but his bold defense left his enemies unmoved, except by a desire to see whether he might not, under proper persuasion, lament those sentiments.

On the evening of the day Howard's advertisement appeared, the people of Boston put on their second riot, in which the house of Lieutenant-Governor Hutchinson was attacked. On the following morning, August 27, before news of the Hutchinson riot could have reached Newport, the inhabitants were treated to a parade in which three effigies were carried through the streets with halters about their necks and then suspended from a newly-erected gallows in front of the courthouse, while three leading merchants marched back and forth below the scaffold with clubs on their shoulders. The figures swinging above could be recognized by the labels conspicuously attached to them. One was Augustus Johnston, who had been appointed Distributor of Stamps for Rhode Island. The second was marked "That fawning, insidious, infamous Parricide, Martinus Scriblerus," meaning Martin Howard, Jr., and the third "that mawgazeen of Knowledge, Dr. Murphy," in other words, Dr. Thomas Moffat. The epithets had been drawn from James Otis's scurrilous pamphlet attacking the Newport group, but the artists who constructed the images added one original touch of their own. They connected Howard's neck with Moffat's by a rope bearing another label with their final verdict on the O.Z. letters. Howard and Moffat were supposed to be saying, "We have an hereditary, indefeasible right to an Haltar; besides we encouraged the growth of Hemp you know."²

² For the events described in this and the ensuing six paragraphs, except as otherwise noted, see the following: *Newport Mercury*, September 2, September 9, 1765; *Boston Gazette*, September 2, 1765; *Connecticut Courant*, September 9, 1765; William Almy to Elisha Story, August 29, 1765, Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings*, 55 (1923), 235–237; Chalmers Papers, Rhode Island, New York Public Library; Augustus Johnston to Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class 1, Bundle 439, Public Record Office, Library of Congress transcripts; John Robin-

¹ Thomas Moffat, Manuscript account of the Newport riots, Chalmers Papers, Rhode Island, New York Public Library. *Prologue to Revolution*, 109–113.

The gentlemen who had been so suggestively portrayed feared the worst and retired to the safest places they could think of, Moffat to his farm across the Bay in Kingstown, the others to the man-of-war in the harbor. John Robinson went aboard the *Cygnét* too, "well knowing," as he said, "the Disposition of the People towards all Kings Officers, and the Danger to be apprehended from an inflamed Multitude." Evidently, however, the multitude was not as inflamed as the organizers of the show had expected. During the afternoon, therefore, they provided refreshments, with the hope of drawing a larger crowd. According to Doctor Moffat, they sent out runners to invite the people to this free picnic and served "strong drink in plenty with Cheshire cheese and other provocatives to intemperance and riot." When the party was well under way, the effigies were cut down and burned in a bonfire. After this, in spite of the strong drink and the Cheshire cheese, the crowd dispersed, news having been spread that the principal characters required for any further activities had gone aboard the men-of-war. The next morning Moffat, Howard, Johnston, and Robinson returned home and found everything calm, but during this day, in all probability, news of the exciting riot at Boston reached Newport and further aroused the ambition of Newporters to take a more dramatic stand against the conservatives.³ The events which began around dusk that evening occurred so rapidly that people later found it difficult to trace them in exact order.

As it was growing dark John Robinson and Martin Howard, Jr., in company with two other gentlemen who may or may not have been Moffat and Johnston, were walking down Queen Street. A man by the name of Samuel Grandall, who bore a private grudge against Robinson—for what reason is not apparent—stepped up at the head of a small party of men and collared the customs officer. Howard and Robinson's other companions succeeded in prying the man loose, and while Robinson hurriedly made his way home, Howard gave the bystanders a lecture on their unseemly behavior. He paid for his daring at once. A mob quickly collected, and with faces painted and broad axes in their hands, they poured down the street to Howard's house

son to Commissioners of Customs, August 28, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442. *Prologue to Revolution*, 109-113. See also Lowrey, *Rhode Island Politics*, 101, 104-110.

³ A letter in the Siles Papers, Yale University Library (J. Avery to J. Collins, August 19, 1765), suggests that the instigators of the Newport riot may have been in correspondence with the Loyal Nine in Boston.

and gave it the same treatment that the Boston mob had given Hutchinson's, though Howard himself made his escape.

This was only a beginning. At Doctor Moffat's, where the mob made their next call, they found material worthy of their efforts. Moffat was something of a collector, and the hiss of ripping canvas could be heard in the din as their axes tore through "Venus Sleeping," "Cleopatra," "Polly Peacham," "The Judgment of Hercules," and "The Countess of Coventry." There were also various intricate scientific gadgets of an appealing fragility (known to the times as "philosophical instruments"), such as telescopes, microscopes, barometers, thermometers, compasses, and hydrometers. These and the fine china from the Doctor's cabinet made a satisfying clatter, and there was also a library of valuable books, some of which splashed at the bottom of the well, while others enlarged the libraries of those who themselves had a taste for collecting.⁴

When there was no more fun to be had at the Doctor's, the mob surged on toward John Robinson's. His housemate, Lieutenant Wickham, warned him of their approach⁵ in time for him to make his way to safety aboard the *Cygnét*, where Wickham shortly joined him, for Wickham too, by virtue of his associations, was obnoxious. Deprived of the opportunity to manhandle the Collector, the mob spared the house, which did not belong to Robinson anyhow, and went on to the Comptroller, John Nicoll. But he too had fled.

Finally they got around to the Stamp Distributor. Augustus Johnston had already left, but his friends were there, frantically trying to hide his most valuable possessions in neighboring houses. The mob carted off much of what remained; but the house itself was spared, and when his friends promised that he would resign the next morning the crowd departed. By eleven o'clock, still going strong, they had made a full circle and found themselves back at Howard's, where they now tore up floors, hearths, and chimney pieces. Then on to Moffat's once more, to finish the job there in the same way. They finally wound up about 2 A.M. at Howard's again, their broad axes still sharp enough to cut down the tough young locust trees that lined his yard. After triumphantly stuffing the ends of these into the cannons of the Parade, they marched home to the sleep of exhaustion and drink.

As the principal members of Newport's most exclusive club gathered together one by one aboard the *Cygnét*, they found that none of their number had been killed or injured, but their worst forebodings about the mad "Herd"

⁴ Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 437.

which ruled Rhode Island had been confirmed, and the town of Newport had lost its attraction for them. Moffat and Howard, thinking doubtless of the hostile faces which they had encountered ever since their publication of the O.Z. letters and the Halifax Letter, decided that Newport was not worth saving. Without going ashore they left by the first ship for England. Augustus Johnston, who despite his office was less unpopular than his companions, went back to town and publicly resigned, though he, like Andrew Oliver in Boston, had not yet received his official appointment.

For Robinson the future was not so easy. The riot had begun with an attack on him by Samuel Crandall. And though Crandall was not himself a merchant, Robinson suspected that he had been egged on by the merchants in hope that the customs officers would be intimidated into overlooking smuggling activities. This suspicion was confirmed when, the morning after the riot, a message came to him from Crandall, saying "that if we would agree to receive our Fees agreeable to their Will and Pleasure,⁵ and would also deliver up the Sloop Polly and her Cargo, now under Prosecution before Doctor Spry at Halifax, I might come on Shore in Safety, and rely on their Protection."⁶ Here was a truly outrageous proposal, to threaten the life of the Collector unless he would disobey an act of Parliament, and unless he would deliver the *Polly*, which had already caused him so much grief. Robinson sued out a warrant for the arrest of Crandall and issued a notice offering a hundred dollars reward for information leading to the conviction of other rioters, but the Sheriff returned the warrant as impossible to execute under peril of his life, and no one appeared to claim the hundred dollars.⁷

The behavior of Governor Ward was almost as disgraceful as that of the mob.⁸ He had refused to take action to prevent the display of the effigies, even

5 This may have meant a proposal that the customs officers should compound with the merchants for a certain annual sum in lieu of duties, or it may have meant that the customs officers should allow the merchants or the Rhode Island Assembly to set the fees which the customs officers collected for their services in clearing and entering vessels. In the preceding year acts had been passed regulating the fees which officers of government, including customs officers, could charge for performance of official duties. John R. Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England* (Providence, 1856-1865), VI, 413.

6 John Robinson to Commissioners of Customs, September 5, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442.

7 *Ibid.*, *Newport Mercury*, September 9, 1765.

8 On Ward's behavior and his exchanges with Robinson and Leslie described below, see Moffat's account in Chalmers Papers, Rhode Island, and *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, VI, 453-457.

though he knew all about the plans days in advance. He had left town after the hanging and did not return until the rioting was over. When Robinson applied to him for protection against the men who were trying to intimidate him, he answered with empty assurances, "that everything is perfectly tranquil, and that you may immediately return to town with all the safety imaginable." Robinson and the other customs officers replied that "while one Samuel Crandall, a principal fellow amongst the mob, dares, to this moment, to threaten the collector; and also on his and their behalf, prescribe the terms on which he may come on shore, we cannot consider the riot quelled, or that we may attend to the execution of our offices, either with safety to our persons and property, or to the King's revenue." To this communication, which should have resulted in an order for Crandall's arrest, the Governor answered that he had talked with Crandall, and "upon examining him, he assures me, that he has not the least intention of raising any disturbance or riot, or of doing any kind of injury. . . . He says Mr. Robinson has personally used him ill, and he shall insist upon proper satisfaction; but has not even a thought of taking any illegal or riotous method for obtaining it." The Governor again assured the Collector that there was no danger of another riot and that he might safely come ashore, and yet on the same day that he said this, September first, Captain Leslie of the *Cygnets* informed him of a plan in which Crandall was involved, to rescue the *Polly*. Though the case was being tried before Judge Spry at Halifax, the *Polly* was still in Newport harbor, lying under the guns of the *Cygnets*. According to the plan reported to Leslie, the mob was going "to man and arm a number of boats or vessels, and possess themselves of the fort; and in case they find a resistance on my part, when such boats or vessels are endeavoring to take away the said sloop (which will certainly be the case, when we discover any such attempt being made,) that then the guns at the fort are to be fired at His Majesty's ship under my command. This, I own, appears very surprising; but from the repetition of the report, and what happened last year to His Majesty's schooner *St. John*, I must own I think the madness of the mob may carry them to such lengths, without the interposition of the government's authority."

Governor Ward dismissed this communication as he had those from Robinson. But as long as Robinson stayed aboard the *Cygnets*, the customs office in Newport stayed closed, and the merchants were unable to clear vessels for departure. Bold as the merchants might be, they did not at present dare send their ships to sea without clearance papers. The British Navy would seize ships without papers wherever they found them, and there was no mob avail-

long as Robinson kept the custom-house closed, foreign trade in Newport was at a standstill.

Robinson could afford to wait. He employed his time by writing an account of the riot and also of the *St. John* episode to the Lords of the Treasury in England. The occasion was an appropriate one for supporting his friends' petition for a royal government, and he assured the Lords that all the riots sprang "from the principles of the constitution of the government, which is the most popular that can be formed," and "that the same causes will be the sources of future riots and disturbances."⁹ While Robinson was enjoying the hospitality of Captain Leslie and writing his letters, the merchants were clamoring for the custom-house to open. After four days the clamor reached the ears of the Governor, and since Robinson would not come ashore without a bodyguard, the Governor was obliged on September 2 to provide "5 Or 6 civil Officers," to protect him.¹⁰

With the custom-house open again, business proceeded, but everyone knew that a new crisis was not far away. The people were evidently determined to prevent the use of stamps after November first. The Stamp Distributor had resigned; the Governor had refused to take the oath required of him to assist in enforcing the Act;¹¹ and the Assembly had passed a resolution directing all officers to ignore the Act.¹² But John Robinson was not an officer of the Colony of Rhode Island; he was an officer of the King. If he refused to disregard the Stamp Act, all trade out of Newport would be at an end. In anticipation of the crisis merchants loaded as many of their ships as possible and hurried them out of port before the November first deadline.¹³

The tension increased when news leaked out that the stamped papers for Rhode Island had arrived in Boston and at the direction of Augustus Johnston had been brought to Newport and placed aboard the *Cygnet*—this in spite of his resignation. The stamped papers had of course been shipped be-

⁹ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, Colonial Series*, VI, 387.

¹⁰ John Robinson to Commissioners of Customs, September 5, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442.

¹¹ According to Ezra Stiles, Governor Ward was upheld in his refusal to take the oath by the Assembly, which voted that he was included in the promise of indemnity in the resolution directing all officers of government to ignore the Act. See above, ch. VII, and Ezra Stiles's Stamp Act Notebook, Stiles Manuscripts, Yale University Library.

¹² *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, VI, 452.

¹³ The listings of clearances in the *Newport Mercury* for the last weeks in October, 1765, are much larger than in previous weeks and much larger than in the corresponding weeks of previous years.

fore his resignation, and friends in England had given bond for their safety. When he received word of their arrival, he had to do something about them lest they be destroyed and his friends forfeit their bonds. The safest place for stamped papers as well as for stamp distributors was aboard a man-of-war, and so he had them delivered to the *Cygnet*. Although it is difficult to see how he could honorably have done less, the people of Newport feared that he intended to act in the office he had publicly resigned.¹⁴ During the night of Saturday, October 19, someone posted a paper on the drawbridge at Long Wharf, where Sunday-morning strollers could not fail to notice it. It warned Johnston that his life would not be worth much in Newport, should he attempt to distribute the stamps. It also communicated some resolutions adopted by the "respectable populace," with regard to the Collector of Customs. There was no indication as to who comprised this respectable populace or as to when and where they adopted their resolutions, but the resolutions themselves were not ambiguous:

That the C—r of N— shall use none of them [stamps] in his office, upon pain of our highest displeasure.

That if he will clear no vessels upon paper without Stamps, that he shall be drove out of town with a high hand.

That any merchant clearing out his vessel upon St—p papers, shall meet with our highest displeasure.¹⁵

When the fatal day of November first arrived, the merchants had already cleared out all available vessels, so that there was no immediate necessity of facing the issue. However, as more vessels kept coming into port, Robinson realized that he would have to give unstamped clearances or else leave town. On November 21 he went through the formality of applying to Augustus Johnston for the proper stamped papers. Johnston could only answer that it

¹⁴ Captain Charles Leslie of the *Cygnet* and Thomas Moffat, both stated that Ezra Stiles, the pastor of the Second Congregational Church at Newport, harangued the crowd after Johnston's original resignation and warned them that it was no resignation at all, that in spite of it Johnston would be able to resume the office whenever he pleased (*Calendar of Home Office Papers of the Reign of George III, 1760–1765*, London, 1878, pp. 610–611; Chalmers Papers, Rhode Island, New York Public Library). Stiles denied that he had anything to do with the violence against Johnston (letter to Benjamin Franklin, November 6, 1765, Stiles Manuscripts), but Johnston's letter to the Commissioners of Stamps, August 31, 1765, suggests that Johnston did intend to carry on the office if popular hostility subsided (Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 439; see also *Newport Mercury*, December 30, 1765). See Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan*, ch. 14.

¹⁵ *Newport Mercury*, October 21, 1765.

would be dangerous to his life and property to supply them.¹⁶ Faced with the same dilemma as Sheaffe and Hallowell in Boston, Robinson capitulated, and by November 25 was carrying on business as usual at the custom-house.¹⁷

After Boston and Newport had shown the way, the mere threat of violence was sufficient in most other colonies. In New York James McEvers did not wait to be asked before resigning as Stamp Distributor. He knew that the invitation would probably be similar to that extended to Andrew Oliver. On August 26, while Boston prepared for its second riot and Newport for its first, McEvers publicly announced his resignation, and wrote to a friend in England asking him to secure the appointment of someone else. He recounted what had happened to Oliver and expressed his belief that other distributors would receive the same treatment by November first. The consequences for himself, he said, would be disastrous, "as I have a Large Store of Goods and Seldom Less than Twenty thousand Pounds Currency value in it with which the Populace would make sad Havock with Respect to my own Person I am not much Concern'd About it, but I must Confess I am Uneasy about my Store, as a Great Part of What I have Been Labouring hard for, is Center'd there, . . . if it is Praceh'd Should be Glad to have Some Other Person Appointed in my Place which I Immagen would be Attended with Little Difficulty as there are many who are not in so good a Way of Business and not so Large a Store at Risque that would gladly undertake it, (by the Present Disposition of People here it Appears that a Stranger would be more Agreeable than a Native)." If transportation then had been what it is now McEvers might have closed his letter here, but it occurred to him that by the time his letter reached England he might already have suffered the loss of his property; in that event he would be glad to have the income which the office of stamp distributor would provide if the Act should be enforced. "If this Letter Should Come to your hands too Late," he wrote, "and I cannot *Probably* be Reliev'd at or about the time the Act is to be in Force in Such Case I Beg you will not make Any Application for my Releasement, as the First month or Six Weeks Service in the Office will be the most Dangerous and Disagreeable Part of it."¹⁸

McEvers's letter must have made painfully clear in England the folly of a decision which George Grenville had made the preceding March. After he had

¹⁶ *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, VI, 476-477.

¹⁷ This fact has been ascertained from evidence in the Aaron Lopez Invoice Book, Newport Historical Society, and from letters of Ezra Stiles to different persons which indicate the sailing dates of ships from Newport, Stiles Manuscripts.

¹⁸ James McEvers to Barlow Trecothick, August, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 430.

driven the Stamp Act through Parliament against the objections of the colonial agents, he had determined to make another appeal for colonial goodwill, this one more genuine than his suggestion that the colonies tax themselves. He had summoned the agents and announced that he would appoint native Americans as stamp distributors.¹⁹ The offices would not be sinecures, but they would be lucrative, and Grenville supposed that the appointment of Americans would be taken as a friendly gesture. Grenville was a politician, and in the world of politicians the distribution of offices is the principal cement of friendship. What he failed to realize was that by making his stamp masters native Americans he was giving the colonists a lever by which to pry them loose from their positions. If the stamp masters had been Englishmen, strangers to the country, with no property or interests invested in it, they could have withstood the pressure of the populace much longer. But the office was not sufficiently valuable in the eyes of most Americans to make it worthwhile sacrificing the property they had accumulated in a lifetime. John Robinson, an Englishman, could have held out indefinitely aboard the *Cygnat* against the Newport mob. Augustus Johnston, though he might come aboard to save his skin, could not bring his house and business with him. And while the mob made off with some of his property, they left enough to work on in case the first night's attack did not produce his resignation. After the Boston mob had shown the way to deal with an American stamp distributor by pulling down Andrew Oliver's new building, the distributors in other colonies, as McEvers's letter reveals, had to weigh the value of their property against the value of the fees they might or might not collect. There were other factors in the equation, a man's honor and dignity for example, and even his life, but no one could neglect to consider the loss in pounds and shillings which accepting the stamp office might entail.

McEvers, by resigning before a mob demanded it, was able to save something of his dignity, and all of his property. William Cox, his neighbor in New Jersey, did the same. On August 24 he was writing to the Secretary of the Stamp Office in England that "no spirit of undutifulness or disrespect has yet appeared . . . from the People of New Jersey."²⁰ On September 2 he resigned, though Governor William Franklin maintained that he had received no threats or insults to cause him to do so.²¹

¹⁹ New Haven Colony Historical Society, *Papers*, 9 (1918), 323, 337.

²⁰ Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 455.

²¹ William Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, September 7, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442.

Other distributors, not so far-sighted or not so timid, struck it out longer and consequently suffered losses or were obliged to eat humble pie. When Zachariah Hood of Maryland refused to resign after his house had been pulled down on September 2, the mob effectively prevented him from acting by forcing him to flee for his life with only the clothes on his back.²² Lieutenant-Governor Colden of New York gave him refuge in that colony at Fort George, but this was not a very convenient place from which to distribute stamps for Maryland. At first Hood hoped that a man-of-war might be anchored off the Maryland coast from which he could officiate, but by November 10, he had given up this idea as impracticable, and on November 26 the New York mob sought him out and helped their neighbors to the south by forcing his resignation.²³

George Meserve, Distributor for New Hampshire, owed his appointment to the fact that he was visiting England when the Act was passed. Even before he set foot again in America, he discovered that he had accepted a liability. The pilot who came aboard to guide his ship into Boston harbor on September 8 delivered a letter from the principal gentlemen of Portsmouth, saying that it would not be safe for him to come home until he had first relinquished his office. The rebellious temper of America became even more apparent when the Boston mob forced his ship to lie for two days in the harbor, under protection of the men-of-war there. Not until they were persuaded that the stamped paper for New England was not aboard would they permit her to dock. Awakened to his danger, Meserve announced his resignation before going ashore, whereupon the Bostonians received him with acclamations and conducted him to the Exchange Tavern for a celebration.²⁴ He found his fellow colonists in New Hampshire equally determined but less cordial. Although he agreed to all their demands, he nevertheless slept uneasily, always with arms by his

²² *Maryland Gazette*, September 5, 1765; Zachary Hood, probably to Captain Kennedy, September 2, 1765, Sedgwick Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²³ *Ibid.*, and Zachariah Hood to Benjamin Franklin, September 23, 1765, to Commissioners of Stamps, November 10, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442; *Maryland Gazette*, January 30, 1766; Knollenberg, *Origin of the American Revolution*, 234, 378.

²⁴ *Massachusetts Gazette and Boston News-Letter*, September 12, 1765; George Meserve to Commissioners of Stamps, September 30, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442; James Gordon to William Martin, September 10, 1765, Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings*, 2d ser., 13 (1900), 393.

side, and he dared not engage even in private business for fear of having his "Interests destroyed by a mob."²⁵

Jared Ingersoll of Connecticut, in spite of being threatened and hurried in effigy in various parts of the colony, held his ground for several weeks but was finally obliged to resign on September 15, when a mob accosted him on his way to the meeting of the Assembly and prepared to lynch him.²⁶

John Hughes, a proud man with a sharp tongue, was able to avoid bowing to the Philadelphia mobs until October 7, when they wrung from him a promise that he would not execute the Act unless the other colonies did. Since he was Distributor for Delaware as well as Pennsylvania, he was obliged to give an assurance to the people of that colony that his promise included them too.²⁷

George Mercer of Virginia, like George Meserve of New Hampshire, had been in England when the Act was passed, and not anticipating opposition, he too had accepted an appointment as Distributor. Mercer did not arrive in Williamsburg until October 30, two days before the Act was to go into effect. Unfortunately for him, his arrival coincided with a meeting of the General Court which had filled the town with people from all over the colony. They met him in the street even before he had reached his lodgings and demanded his resignation at once. He asked time to consult his friends, and then, followed by the crowd, he walked to the Coffee House, where the Governor and most of the Council were sitting on the porch. These high officials received him warmly, to the chagrin of those below, and when the mob prepared to seize him, Governor Fauquier stepped forward and taking him by the arm, conducted him safely through the awed assembly, to the accompaniment of angry murmurs. The two men walked to the Governor's mansion and there talked the matter over. "He asked me what he should do," Fauquier reported to the Board of Trade. "In return I asked him whether he was afraid for his life, if he was it was too tender a point for me to advise him; if not his Honor and interest both demanded he should hold the office; and if that should be his resolution he must not regard the reasonings of his Father and Brother two Lawyers attending the Court, who were both frightened out of their senses for him. He left me that night in a State of uncertainty what part he should act."

²⁵ George Meserve to Stamp Office, December 3, 16, 1765, House of Lords Manuscripts, February 14, 1766, Library of Congress transcripts.

²⁶ *Connecticut Courant*, September 23, 1765. See below, ch. XIV.

²⁷ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 10, 1765. See below, ch. XIII.

By the next morning the state of uncertainty was gone. Either from a different view of honor and interest or because his father and brother had communicated their fears on the point too tender for the Governor's advice, George Mercer resigned.²⁸

The populace of Charles Town, South Carolina, had two stamp men to take care of, for both Caleb Lloyd, Distributor for the colony, and George Saxby, Inspector of Stamps for North Carolina, South Carolina, and the Bermudas²⁹ resided in their town. Lloyd fled for his life on October 20 when the arrival of the stamps precipitated a mob bent on destroying both him and the paper. He dared not return to town, and George Saxby, arriving from London on October 27, joined him at Fort Johnson. There, after two days of willing imprisonment, both stamp men agreed to suspend their duties until the petitions of the Stamp Act Congress (which had just finished its meetings at New York) had been sent to England and Parliament's determination on them returned. Hoping to exonerate themselves in England, they wrote to the British Stamp Office that they had given in only "after two days being prisoners in the fort, to prevent Murther and the destruction of the town which we were well informed by our friends would certainly have happened the Inspectors house having been already rendered uninhabitable himself burnt in Effigie and the Mobs further resolution of pulling the same to the Ground and putting us to death unless we agreed to suspend. . . ." ³⁰

November first arrived before the people of North Carolina and Georgia knew who their distributors were to be. Henry McCulloh, the original appointee for North Carolina, had declined the office. Dr. William Houston, who had been fixed on in place of McCulloh, did not hear of his own appointment until summoned from his home in Duplin County to Wilmington, sixty miles distant, to claim a letter from the Stamp Office. The wary citizens of Wilmington, suspecting the contents of the letter, had intercepted it and turned it over to the Mayor for delivery. When Houston arrived on November 16 and opened it, their suspicions were confirmed, and they required him to resign forthwith.³¹

28 Fauquier to Lords of Trade, November 3, 1765, House of Lords Manuscripts, January 27, 1766; *Pennsylvania Journal*, November 14, 1765.

29 House of Lords Manuscripts, January 29, 1766.

30 George Saxby and Caleb Lloyd to Commissioners of Stamps, October 29, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 455; William Bull to Lords of Trade, November 3, 1765, House of Lords Manuscripts, February 14, 1766.

31 *New Hampshire Gazette*, December 27, 1765; William Houston to Commissioner of Stamps, November 20, 1765, House of Lords Manuscripts, February 14, 1766.

In Georgia, as November first approached and passed without news of stamps or stamp distributor for the colony, nervous radicals conducted their demonstrations with nameless effigies and sent threatening letters to a number of conservative citizens suspected of secretly holding the office or of harboring stamps. Finally, on November 7, the *Georgia Gazette* informed its readers that one George Angus was their man. Angus was not available for threatening, because he had not yet left England. Furthermore, he was not a native of the province, the lone exception to Grenville's ruling on this point, and hence he was not susceptible to property damage. But it was not property damage that Governor Wright feared for him. To secure him from violence the Governor made elaborate preparations, so that when his ship arrived at Tybee on January 4, he was whisked away to Wright's house before his presence became generally known. There he immediately took the required oaths of office and distributed stamp papers to the customs officers. In spite of this successful beginning George Angus quickly discovered that his new occupation was not a healthy one, and before two weeks were up he had left for parts unknown.³²

The infection did not spread so alarmingly north of New England or south of Georgia, but in the colonies which later participated in the American Revolution there was no one able or willing on November first to put the Act into execution. And in most of these colonies, or so the royal governors claimed, it was the contagious example of Boston which had set off the troubles.

The royal governors, to be sure, were not the most disinterested observers. Each of them was anxious to exonerate himself and his administration from any blame, and Boston provided a convenient scapegoat; yet the charge probably was justified to a large degree. It may even be true, as Governor William Franklin suggested to his father, that "the Presbyterians of New England have wrote to all their Brethren throughout the Continent, to endeavour to stir up the Inhabitants of each Colony to act as they have done, in hopes of thereby making it appear to the Ministry too difficult a Matter to call them to account for their late outrageous Conduct."³³ Probably, however, it was not necessary to write private letters. The printers of colonial newspapers sent exchange copies to one another, and the news of what had happened in Boston, together with the inflammatory remarks of Boston's patriots, was sent from one end

32 *Georgia Gazette*, October 31, November 7, 14, 1765; James Wright to Secretary of State Conway, January 31, 1766, in Charles C. Jones, Jr., *The History of Georgia* (Boston, 1883), II, 60-64.

33 William Franklin to Benjamin Franklin, September 7, 1765, Treasury Papers, Class I, Bundle 442.

of the continent to the other in the *Boston Gazette*. The effect of the news in so distant a colony as South Carolina was described by Governor Bull in a letter to the Lords of Trade on November 3, 1765:

Accounts had been received from Boston of the Outrages committed there on the 14th and 26th of August last, and also of those at Rhode Island to show their determined Resolutions to prevent or elude the Execution of the Stamp Act in those Provinces, and also of the Intentions, which other Provinces at the Northward had expressed to the like purpose; tho' not with so much violence; . . . New England vaunts its Numbers, and arrogates glory to itself in taking the lead of North America. For before those accounts came, the People of this Province, tho' they conceived it too great a burthen, seemed generally disposed to pay a due obedience to the Act, and at the same time in a Dutiful and respectful manner to represent to his Majesty the hardships, which it would lay them under, and to pray relief therein . . . But by the Artifices of some busy Spirits the minds of Men here were so universally poisoned with the principles, which were imbibed and propagated from Boston and Rhode Island, from which Towns, at this time of the year, Vessels very frequently arrive, that after their Example the People of this Town resolved to seize and destroy the Stamp Papers, and to take every means of deterring the Stamp Officers from executing their Duty.³⁴

Boston and Rhode Island could take credit for the initial leadership, but people in South Carolina, and for that matter in the other colonies, would scarcely have been ready to follow such distant leaders if the direction of march had not been agreeable.

CHAPTER TEN

Nullification:

Ports and Courts

ALTHOUGH MASSACHUSETTS took the lead in violence, several other colonies were putting their ships to sea with clearance papers unstamped before Sheaffe and Hallowell finally opened the Boston custom-house. The speed with which merchants were able to resume business as usual after November first, was measured by their own determination, by the contrary determination of their customs officers and governor, and by the economic needs of their particular colony. In Georgia where, on November first, there were no stamps, no stamp distributor, and indeed no copy of the Stamp Act itself, Governor Wright and his Council felt justified in authorizing the clearance of ships without stamps. The customs officers simply continued to use old forms, with a note to the effect that no stamps were available.¹

In Georgia this procedure was temporary, and the ports closed on November 30, after Governor Wright and the customs officers received definite notices of the Act;² but in Virginia the Act was consistently violated, so far as shipping was concerned, from November second onward. The way was smoothed here by the fact that George Mercer, who brought the stamps for Virginia with him, claimed to have none for the custom-house, so that the necessity of proceeding without them appeared to arise from neglect in England rather than from violence in America.³ The procedure was facilitated too by the straightforwardness of the Governor and of the Surveyor General of the

¹ *Georgia Gazette*, November 7, 14, 1765; *Colonial Records of Georgia*, IX, 435.

² *Colonial Records of Georgia*, IX, 439-440, 454-456.

³ Certificate by Fauquier, House of Lords Manuscripts, February 14, 1766, Library of Congress transcripts.

³⁴ House of Lords Manuscripts, February 14, 1766. Cf. James Wright to Lords of Trade, November 9, 1765, *ibid.*; Fauquier to Secretary of State Conway, December 11, 1765, House of Lords Manuscripts, February 6, 1766.