Morality, Politics, and Compromise: The Plight and Prospects of the Moderate, Then and Now



In polarizing times, there is a price to be paid—at the polls and otherwise—for attempting to chart a middle path.

Cherokee Slaveholders and Radical Abolitionists



JOHN RIDGE.

A CHEROKEE.

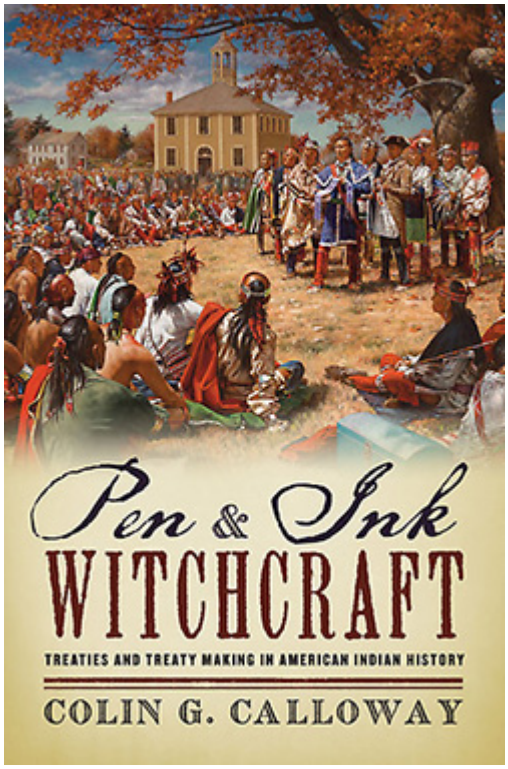
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An unlikely alliance in antebellum America

Indian Treaties Redux



In 1791, Ottawa war leader Egushawa remarked that he would rather fight an American army than be prisoner to their Indian treaties, which he derided as "pen and ink witch-craft, which they can make speak things we never intended, or had any idea of, even an hundred years hence." Egushawa's prophetic words reflect the basic premise of Colin G. Calloway's new book, in which he argues that treaties were the "primary instruments" by which indigenous peoples were deprived of their lands, autonomy, and sovereignty, more so than by simple violence and warfare (2). In fact, Calloway crafts an entire narrative of Native American history from the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries predicated on the negotiation of Indian treaties between indigenous peoples and Euro-Americans. Through this narrative, he asserts treaties provide "a barometer of Indian-white relations in North America," which demonstrates the "shifts in power, changing attitudes about the place of Indian peoples in American society, and contested ideas about indigenous rights in a modern constitutional democracy" (3).

While skeptics may cringe at the thought of orienting Native American history around treaty-making due to its potential connotations of the archaic "Indian-white relations," Calloway presents several compelling reasons for why treaties

offer a unique analytical lens into the interactions between Native peoples and Euro-Americans. First and foremost, Calloway depicts Indian treaties as "foundational documents in the nation's history, alongside sacred texts like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution," which "are open to interpretation by subsequent generations" (xi). As Calloway illustrates, indigenous peoples today still grapple with the repercussions of treaties negotiated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which are continually reinterpreted and contested by tribal, state, and federal courts. Yet as Calloway proves, Native peoples adapted to, subverted, and even co-opted these treaties and their judicial interpretations to assert indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and economic independence today despite federal lethargy and hostility from non-Native communities. Simply put, Calloway supplies historical context for how treaties evolved from informal negotiations in the colonial past to the official "law of the land" that now defines the political and judicial relationship between Native peoples and the United States (241).



In this process of defining the fledgling nation through treaties at home and abroad, the federal government deliberately excluded Native peoples from the new polity and created a vicious cycle of "recurrent dispossession of Indians as the United States pushed steadily westward."

Calloway also states that Indian treaties and the process of treaty-making encapsulate the broader themes that resonate throughout Native American history, such as dispossession and resistance, indigenous agency and voice, non-Indian cultural attitudes toward Indians, and the evolution of modern Indian jurisprudence. Calloway's book follows these themes throughout its three-part structure, which offers pairs of chapters on treaty-making in colonial America, the removal era, and the mid- to late-nineteenth century in the American west and on the Great Plains. In colonial America, Native peoples like the Iroquois still wielded great power in their interactions with Euro-Americans and asserted their own interests in treaty negotiations. As a consequence of such Indian power, Euro-Americans saw Native polities as sovereign entities and used treaties primarily as a way to resolve "issues of trade, war, peace … and criminal jurisdiction" with such autonomous groups (84). However, incessant Euro-American encroachments on Native lands, indigenous resistance and violent responses to settler invasions, and the inability to create fixed boundary lines combined to produce treaties like the one negotiated at Fort Stanwix in 1768 that became solely instruments of dispossession.

Treaties "increased dramatically in number and frequency" in Calloway's second era of treaty-making between 1783-1838 as the United States used these documents to stake American claims to indigenous lands, deny any notions of Native American sovereignty, and complement international treaties with European powers that recognized the United States as a legitimate nation (113).

In this process of defining the fledgling nation through treaties at home and abroad, the federal government deliberately excluded Native peoples from the new polity and created a vicious cycle of “recurrent dispossession of Indians as the United States pushed steadily westward” (114). This was nowhere more evident than in the Treaty of New Echota in 1835, which not only implemented and justified Indian removal, but also created crippling factionalism among the Cherokees and undermined Cherokee efforts to assert sovereignty in their political and legislative battles against the federal government.

Calloway further demonstrates that the continued use of the Indian treaty in the American West during the mid- to late-nineteenth century heralded the reservation and assimilation eras for Native Americans. At first, he illustrates how the indigenous peoples of the West like the Comanche, Lakota, Kiowas, and other groups in the southwest, Pacific Northwest, and Great Plains resisted federal efforts to pacify and relocate indigenous peoples on reservations. Despite such resistance, the federal government forced these Native polities to accept treaties of dispossession at sword-point, followed afterward by confinement to reservations and a coercive policy of assimilation to integrate indigenous peoples into American society and eradicate Native identity and culture. As Calloway concludes, assimilation rendered treaties obsolete as the United States abrogated any and all concessions to Indian power codified in those documents, instead turning Indians into Americans. Yet, contrary to this intent, indigenous communities not only survived as distinct peoples into the twentieth century, but turned treaties against the United States. Particularly during the mid- to late-twentieth century, political activists, Native rights organizations, tribal governments, and other Native Americans rallied around the treaties their ancestors had negotiated with Euro-Americans since the eighteenth century as part of a widespread effort by “Indian people in modern America [to] insist that the United States keep its word” encoded in those treaties (239). Through a Native resuscitation of treaties, Calloway determines that these documents evolved from a tool to pacify, segregate, and assimilate indigenous peoples to become a weapon for Native groups to assert the sovereignty denied to them by the United States since the turn of the nineteenth century.

To complement his narrative, Calloway provides case studies of a particular treaty during each era of treaty-making, specifically Fort Stanwix (1768), New Echota (1835), and Medicine Lodge (1867). As companion chapters to each period of treaty-making, these case studies exemplify the broader themes in Native American history for each era and illustrate how the negotiations that produced such treaties were highly complex and contingent affairs that deflate any sense of “the inevitable march of [American] empire” (6). According to Calloway, he wants to shift the “focus [to] the treaty negotiations as much as on the outcomes of those negotiations,” for “each treaty had its own story and its own cast of characters” who determined what unfolded at those conferences (6-7). Therefore, his narrative is littered with Native actors and voices like the Iroquois headman Conoghquieson, Cherokee leaders John Ridge and John Ross, and Kiowa warriors like Satanta and Satank, who influenced treaty negotiations and

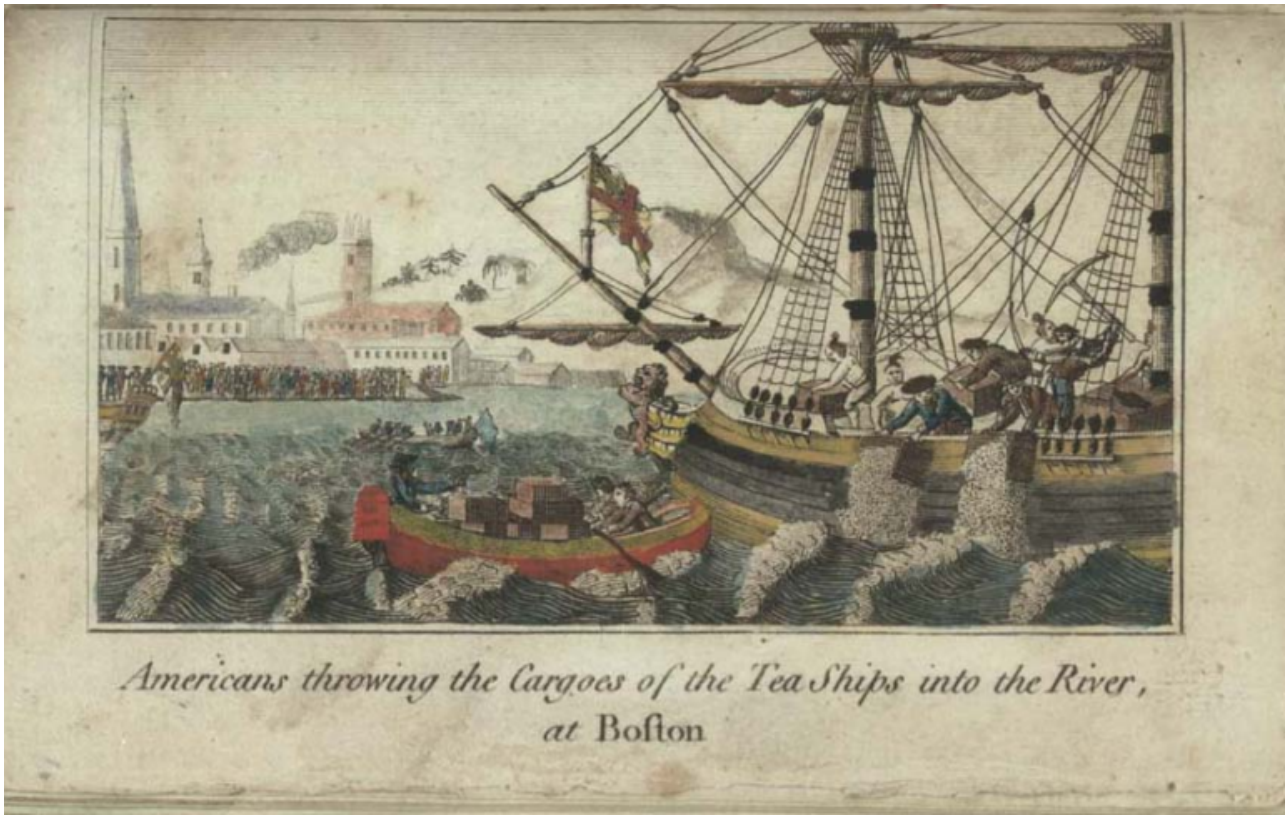
vacillated between strategies of violence and accommodation to confront Euro-American demands. As Calloway concludes, it was these individuals and their efforts in treaty councils in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that produced a definitive set of treaty rights that provided modern Native activists with the tools to articulate alternative and innovative understandings of indigenous autonomy and sovereignty encoded within Indian treaties.

However, the trouble with Calloway's book is that by reconceptualizing a narrative of Native American history through Indian treaties and treaty-making, he is often forced to sacrifice complexity and diversity for brevity's sake. Calloway admittedly confesses his story is centered "in the colonial Northeast, in the early national South, and on the Great Plains…[to] signpost the story of Indian relations and nation building in this country" (10). Calloway therefore deploys examples that are more illustrative of the points he is trying to make, which are hardly representative of the experiences of the great diversity of Native peoples who confronted Euro-American empires and negotiated treaties. For instance, Calloway uses the most familiar indigenous polity, the Iroquois Confederacy, in the colonial era to discuss themes of Native power and intra-Native conflict during treaty negotiations, as well as the transformation of treaties from contracts of peace to tools of dispossession. Yet when compared with Native peoples like the New England "Mission" Indians or Catawbas in the Piedmont region who were resettled on reservation-like lands as early as the eighteenth century, the Iroquois experience is far from representative. Similarly, the many peoples of the southeast like the Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws confronted, subverted, and collaborated in treaty-making in far different ways than the Iroquois. In particular, southeastern indigenous peoples performed different diplomatic customs, ceremonies, and rituals with Euro-Americans during treaty councils, which are overlooked by Calloway in favor of Iroquoian ones, again likely for the sake of simplification. Despite this distraction, though, Calloway's work is an insightful and revelatory look at the long and convoluted history of Indian treaties and treaty-making, which is made all the more relevant by the ongoing debates and conflicts over Indian treaty rights today.

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Mohawks, Mohocks, Hawkubites, Whatever



Down and dirty in eighteenth-century London and Boston

Triangulating Religion and the American Revolution through Jedidiah Morse



“Whenever the pillars of Christianity shall be overthrown, our present republican forms of government, and all the blessings which flow from them, must fall with them.” These were the words of Jedidiah Morse, preached before a Massachusetts congregation in 1799. It is hard to find language that is more histrionic in the American religio-political landscape. At first glance, Morse’s statement clearly reflected the confusion and anxiety that coalesced around the concepts of religion, secularization, Christianity, clerical

authority, Protestantism, atheism, government, partisan politics, and international affairs in the last decade of the eighteenth century. It is therefore easy to view Morse's shrillness simply as a symptom of changing times, specifically of the rapid and well-known process of disestablishment in the early republic. But I would like to come to Morse not from his own era, but from the one that preceded it, the American Revolution. From that vantage point, Morse's words are a bit more puzzling, and I'd like to suggest that they can prompt new methodological and chronological questions, not just about the 1790s, but also about the Age of Revolution. In short, what had really changed to make Morse so nervous, and when was it?

This question ultimately derives from the difficulty of connecting the historiography of religion in the early republic to that of religion during the revolutionary era, as well as to theoretical work on the development of the "secular" across a roughly similar time period. Jedidiah Morse is the center of this inquiry because, as an alarmist and a controversialist, he loudly announced a moment of crisis through his sermons on the Bavarian Illuminati, a particularly hysterical episode in the religio-politics of the early republic. He has also been showing up like a bad penny in my research into this period, suggesting that he might be an effective figure through which to think about the questions suggested above. The Illuminati were a dreaded but nonexistent group of powerful atheists that Morse, Timothy Dwight, and some fellow Federalists feared were conspiring to undermine Christian institutions, as evidenced both by the dangerous turn of the French Revolution and also by the decline of respect for traditional clerical authority in the United States. At its height in the 1790s, this moment of conspiracy-theory panic may have been of short duration, but Morse *did* live in an era of great transition, and his expressions of anxiety are revealing.

In an effort to understand the relationship between the historical course of the American Revolution and the transformation of "religion" in the same period, this essay draws attention to two very different kinds of historical ruptures evident in Morse's writings in the 1790s. The first break involves division within the intellectual, cultural, social and political realm of religion, leading to the emergence of the religious and the secular as separate intellectual categories. The second rift is chronological: the upheaval caused by the political events of the American Revolution, a historical transformation so comprehensive (we often assume) that historians of all arenas are forced to question how, rather than if, their subjects experienced the change. In other words, it is a period where change, rather than continuity, was the norm.

> The question, ultimately, is whether, and in what ways, should we follow Morse's lead by disconnecting the threats to religion from historical events before 1790?

In 1798 and 1799 Morse believed that *his* religion, a public and Protestant form

of that concept in which he enjoyed a privileged position, was endangered by events in the civil realm that threatened the new nation of the United States. Identifying that threat meant operating within a very new historical moment. Though the Federalist clergy had overwhelmingly embraced the legitimacy of the new nation, as Morse reminded his readers, historians will note that when he connected the foundations of his "religion" to the institutions of the United States, he *did not* connect them to, for example, the Protestantism that had animated the British empire of his youth, to an evangelical Kingdom of God, or even to Massachusetts, all of which, in different contexts, were viable religio-political constructs during the late colonial and revolutionary periods of his youth. When Morse linked the foundations of his religion to a government that was only a decade old, he distracted attention from the political events of the preceding era and from polities other than the United States. His political posturing thus served to situate his anxieties in a remarkably short time frame. What happened before 1790 stayed before 1790, as it were. The question, ultimately, is whether, and in what ways, should we follow Morse's lead by disconnecting the threats to religion from historical events before 1790?

I will ask this question in three stages. First, it is necessary to locate what Morse meant when he discussed religion, a phenomenon he identified largely in terms of its public manifestations. Second, I will look at what threats he identified to his religion. Both of these discussions focus, as one would expect, on the 1790s. In the third section below, I seek to place the Illuminati controversy and the religion in the 1790s in a wider context, and finally return to the question at hand—what do religion and politics in the 1790s have to do with the American Revolution?

Morse's Religion

Most historians know Morse for his widely circulated geographies and for the activities of his even more famous son, artist and telegrapher Samuel F. B. Morse. Jedidiah was born in Woodstock, Connecticut, in 1761, in the waning days of the Seven Years' War. He came of age in the midst of the Revolutionary War. Too infirm to serve in the defining conflict of his youth, he spent the war years in New Haven, and he studied with Jonathan Edwards, *fils*. By all accounts, as a young man he was not particularly drawn to the theological questions that animated his New Divinity peers. Thus, after graduation he worked and traveled for a few years as an adjunct scholar and minister, and it was during this time that he researched and wrote his *American Geography*, the genre (in a variety of forms and editions) for which he became most known. On his travels he made the most of the clerical and political networks to which his position as a member of the religio-intellectual elite gave him access. He finally took up a pulpit in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1789, a prominent post from which he both lamented and hastened (through his anti-Unitarian machinations) the decline of New England's "Standing Order" over the next several decades. He later published more geographies, histories, periodicals,

and a few sermons, and he helped found some of the major religious reform societies of the day, including the American Bible Society. But he never held major office or ascended to the upper echelons of literary fame, and by all accounts his shrill and contentious personality limited his influence.



“Rev. Jedediah [Jedidiah] Morse, D.D.” lithograph by James Kidder and Thomas Edwards, published by Senefelder Lithograph Company (Boston, 1831). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Though Morse did not rise to the pinnacles of the intellectual, theological, or political elites of his day, his writings are still widely cited in a variety of contexts. His polemics, his role as a historian (for which he corresponded with figures such as John Adams), and his contributions to the project of crafting national identity through his geographies have made his corpus of work a useful source for understanding cultural and intellectual trends in the early republic. In addition, Morse is also something of a darling of the twenty-first century Christian political right. In those circles, he is sometimes a “Founding Father” and sometimes an important historical observer of the nation’s birth. Christian nationalist David Barton has numerous references to Morse on his Wallbuilders website, and quotations from his sermons continue to circulate in ways that suggest the enduring importance of the anxiety about religion in the United States that he articulated. Morse was, these modern interpreters suggest, a witness to history, a well-qualified observer of a moment of greatness, as well as someone who issued an early clarion call to the citizens of the nation for the essential and foundational role of religion in government. Morse noticed great change around him.

Academic historians have agreed with at least that assessment: something was rapidly changing about what Morse referred to as religion in the 1790s and in the early modern era more generally. My discomfort with this paradigm comes not from any essential disagreement with historical assessments of the Illuminati event, but with the relationship of this micro-moment of pivotal change in the category of religion (the 1790s) to that which came before it, the period of the Revolutionary War. Before turning to that subject, however, we should know what Morse referred to as religion. This matters because if we are slippery about what we mean by a term as amorphous as “religious decline,” we can easily lose our capacity to locate cause and effect. Religious decline in a vague sense can be seen merely because something new is on the scene, a new mode of intellectual inquiry, or a new political system. But the arrival of something new does not always signal the decline of something old. To see the decline of religion, we have to know what religion (in a particular given context) is.

In his 1799 Illuminati sermon, Morse built a workable, clergy-driven (and defined) iteration of a public institution that he called “religion.” The religion he discussed had little to do with the individual soul or personal spiritual experience. In the context of the Illuminati, Morse was primarily

concerned with religion as an institutional, cultural, and political system. He started from his text, Psalm 11, verse 3: “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” He then made the assertion that the nation’s “dangers are of two kinds, those which affect our religion, and those which affect our government.” The two are “so closely allied,” he explained, “that they cannot, with propriety, be separated.” Religion (he slipped quickly to the more precise “Christianity”) and governmental stability were, for Morse, integrally linked. Christianity, he went on to explain, provided the “kindly influence” requisite for “that degree of civil freedom, and political and social happiness which mankind now enjoy.” He continued:

In proportion as the genuine effects of Christianity are diminished in any nation, either through unbelief, or the corruption of its doctrines, or the neglect of its institutions; in the same proportion will the people of that nation recede from the blessings of genuine freedom, and approximate the miseries of complete despotism. I hold this to be a truth confirmed by experience. If so, it follows, that all efforts made to destroy the foundations of our holy religion, ultimately tend to the subversion of our political freedom and happiness. Whenever the pillars of Christianity shall be overthrown, our present republican forms of government, and all the blessings which flow from them, must fall with them.

In this rendering, the “pillars of Christianity,” according to Morse’s statement, were belief, pure doctrines, and attention to the institutions of Christianity (presumably churches, sacraments, public worship, and the clergy). This, according to Morse, was the “holy religion” that the nation must protect.

For many purposes, it would be reductionist to define “religion” as public versions of belief, doctrine, and institutions, but the definition is a useful one for this context—that articulated by a Protestant minister in a fast day sermon in an established church at the tail end of the eighteenth century. Moreover, each of the elements Morse articulated was, from the perspective of the clergy, quite expansive. Belief, the opposite of unbelief, was not merely the intellectual predilection of an individual or even many individuals, as it might be in a modern, secular world, but rather the broad-based piety of the populace, the presumption that a divine order was paramount and true. Doctrine, the second element, was probably the easiest of the three for clergy to define and endorse, as it was the one that they had historically had the most control over. By including it in the list, Morse implicitly asserted the importance of theological education and the possibility that corrupted doctrine would not be considered religion. This let him exclude, for example, any non-Protestant religion, be that Catholicism or the superstitious practices of native peoples, as well as any Protestants whose doctrine he thought had slipped too far. It was a category that enhanced his own authority. Thus, though he recognized and used the intellectually expansive word “religion” in some contexts, in the world around him the government and freedom for which he advocated relied on an institutional Protestantism overseen by an educated clergy capable of adjudicating doctrine and acceptable boundaries of dissent.

Most important, Morse referred to the institutions of religion. This included both the apparatus of clergy and congregation, and also the presence of the clergy on the public, political stage. It included, for example, the events at which he preached about the Illuminati. President John Adams had called for a fast day a few weeks before the 1798 sermon, asking the nation to spend the day in "solemn humiliation, fasting, and prayer" because "the United States of America are at present placed in a hazardous and afflictive situation by the unfriendly disposition, conduct, and demands of a foreign power," and thus "the duty of imploring the mercy and benediction of Heaven on our country demands at this time a special attention from its inhabitants." Public sermons on nationally ordained fast days were an important ritual of institutional Christianity in the early modern era. Occasional sermons, those preached at such events, represented an agreement between established clergy and the government that at pivotal moments, the population should pause to reflect on its situation in the divine order. The most widely quoted sermons of the Revolutionary period, such as Ezra Stiles's "The United States Elevated," and John Witherspoon's "Dominion of Providence," were preached at these rituals of mutual endorsement between the institutions of Christianity and the state. Morse's sermon thus stood in a long tradition of political preaching. The 1798 sermon's text was a blend of familiar tropes in addition to its outcry for defense against the Illuminati, such as a lament for the general state of present affairs, a call for greater piety, devotion, and unity in a time of national crisis.

The public practice of Protestantism—like any institutional system—required significant resources, both in terms of physical buildings and personnel, and this system was, to read Morse, on the defensive in 1798. One can presume here that Morse referred to the health of those institutions as a core part of "religion." If public worship were neglected, if clergy were not respected as natural moral, political, and intellectual leaders, or if churches were not a part of the infrastructure of towns, the laity, even those who resisted unbelief, would have no regular opportunity to engage "religion," by hearing sermons preached by an educated clergy in a sacred time and space. "If the Clergy fall," he asked in 1798, "what will become of your religious institutions? Undoubtedly they must share the same fate. And are they of no value?" Indeed one of the greatest threats of the Illuminati, as he articulated it again in 1799, was to the clergy, as the devious French interlopers were engaged in "apparently systematic endeavours made to destroy, not only the influence and support, but the official existence of the Clergy."

Morse's definition of religion was fairly conventional for his moment, particularly from the perspective of the clergy and the government. It encompassed formal Protestantism; it admitted acceptable division among denominations about such questions as religious experience, the sacraments, and salvation; and it excluded anything the clergy determined to be corrupted. It was the religion that framers of the Constitution principally imagined when they thought of both religion and establishments. It was the religion that skeptics decried as "priestcraft." This is the version of religion Morse

believed to be in decline in his day.

The Threat Posed

If we accept, for sake of argument, what Morse meant when he discussed religion, and also the idea that the 1790s was an era of intense religious redefinition, the next task is to sort out why, both in Morse's view and in the view of scholars today. My main concern, as mentioned above, is chronological: what relationship did Morse (and his interpreters) perceive between the decline of Morse's form of religion and the American Revolution, the phase of dramatic political change that preceded the 1790s? To start with Morse, he discussed two main threats: 1) attacks on the clergy, such as threats to the public support they received and attempts to thwart them in their duty to speak to public issues, and 2) the great danger of unbelief. The first cause has obvious ties to the historical moment of Morse's writing in the political process of disestablishment, and he referenced that process. The first amendment of 1791 guaranteed that there would be no federal establishment; most colonial establishments had been already been eliminated; and of the states without origins as British colonies, only Vermont created a religious establishment, and it did not long survive. The establishments in Connecticut and Massachusetts were facing increasing scrutiny, and the complex system that sustained the Standing Order faced a series of legal challenges that led to its dismantling. That this process was not concluded until well into the nineteenth century does not mean that ministers like Morse did not resist its progress. In the heat of the Illuminati crisis, however, Morse did not blame the problems on the American political system, for which he protested his profound support, or even on the American Revolution, but rather to a backlash caused by the clergy's opposition to the French.

"North West View of Charlestown Meeting House," drawn in 1799, lithograph by Ephraim W. Bouvé for Frothingham's History of Charlestown in 1846 (Boston, 1846). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Even beyond the attacks on institutional religion, irreligion—unbelief in Morse's terms—was the great threat to "religion" in the last years of the eighteenth century, and France was to blame. In the May 1798 sermon, Morse drew a connection between the words of his biblical text, "This is a day of troubling, or reviling, and blasphemy. Wherefore lift up thy prayer for the remnant that are left," and Adams's words in declaring the fast, the "hazardous and afflictive situation." He articulated the parallels between the trials of King Hezekiah with the Assyrians, on the one hand, and the perilous situation the Americans then faced with the French. Morse then mixed the dangers from abroad with dangers at home. "The astonishing increase of *irreligion*" that he perceived around him also harkened back to his text, as it pointed to a day of

“blasphemy.” Helpfully, Morse explained what he meant by “irreligion.” “I use this word in a comprehensive sense, and would be understood to mean by it, contempt of all religion and moral obligation, impiety, and everything that opposeth itself to pure Christianity.” The irreligion, “disorganizing opinions, and that atheistical philosophy” that had started in Europe had spread. “To this plan,” Morse wrote, “as to its source, we may trace that torrent of irreligion and abuse of every thing good and praise-worthy, which, at the present time, threatens to overwhelm the world.” The overall argument of the Illuminati sermons was an outcry over the terrible events unfolding in Revolutionary France, their spread to the United States through the “plan” of the Illuminati, and the resulting decline of “religion” in what could have been a great nation. The agent of these changes was the insidious conspiracy.

As he articulated his conspiracy theory, Morse explained religious change through the political, historical process, and he did so in a very short time frame, the same post-revolutionary framework that included the process of disestablishment. In short, the 1790s. When he blamed the “*secret societies* under the direction of France” that were endangering the fabric of American society, he suggested the core institutions of his society were in the hands of human, political actors. For example, the Illuminati did their damage through false diplomacy—attempting to raise a black army in St. Domingo that would attempt to foment slave revolt in the South, for example—and also through the more banal crimes of encouraging disrespect and dissent against the Godly rulers of the United States. It is significant that the threat was being furthered by “subtil and secret assistants” who were “increasing in number,” and “multiplying, varying, and arranging their means of attack,” because the largely unseen danger required Morse, as an important representative of public “religion,” to raise the alarm, and also because the danger might result in threats in myriad unknown places, such as in newspaper attacks on Adams, or in democratic societies that advocated for the United States to support the French. The damage had already begun. In addition to the persistent attacks on the place of the clergy, Morse ascribed the “unceasing abuse of our wise and faithful rulers; the virulent opposition to some of the laws of our country, and the measures of the Supreme Executive,” and the Whiskey Rebellion to the machinations of the insidious agitators.

From Conspiracy to Theoretical Puzzle

Historians, those practiced in the careful art of teasing out change over time, have largely concurred with Morse in his chronological framing, if not in his assessment of the threat posed by the Illuminati. Unfortunately, this tacit acceptance has begged an important question about precisely how the Revolution shaped religion, whether one refers to Morse’s public Protestantism or to a different version of the phenomenon then viable in the public discourse. The essence of the problem, historically, reads like a GRE logic problem. Only one of the following should be true: 1) If the decline in religion Morse perceived was real, and it came from causes outside of the realm of religion, those

causes—presumably occurring in the preceding decades or centuries—and their impact should be identifiable. If we *cannot* identify the source, then we (historians of religion) have misunderstood an essential aspect of how religion fit into the nexus of history or how we understand religion, so much so that what is being studied was capable of being fundamentally compromised without our observing it. 2) If the decline in religion was true, but came only from causes native to the category of religion, then the political events of the preceding decades (non-religion events) would have had very little impact on religion itself. In this context, there would be little reason to study religion and the American Revolution at all, though it would presumably still be necessary to track religious developments across those decades if only to avoid a chronological gap in our studies. (I think this is effectively what most historians of religion have been doing.) 3) If there was *no* decline in religion in an era of great anxiety about the subject (as evidenced by the Illuminati crisis), one should nonetheless be able to track the ways that religious categories and debates shifted in the new political environment. But implicitly, since the larger category itself was stable, one should also be able to track those shifting debates and categories in earlier eras, and also link them to the political narrative, given that scholars on both sides of the divide of the revolution do just that.

Historians looking at the Illuminati episode have largely followed one of the first two explanations above, assuming a decline to Morse's public religion and locating the cause either in politics or in changes to religion itself. The problem is the very short time frame involved. Coming just before the election of 1800, the outcry has been presented as an example of Federalist resistance to Democratic political strategies and as a moment in transatlantic anti-Jacobinism. It has been used as evidence of the New England clergy's eroding support for the French cause. Each of these represents important and fine-grained analysis of the politics of a tumultuous decade. The 1790s were marked by the stresses of the emerging political system of the United States, stresses that were rooted in the still new federal Constitution. The problems caused by relations with revolutionary France were also novel in the 1790s. That does not lessen the significance of these arguments, but historians' focus on a quite short chronology here suggests that the rupture between the *ancien régime* (including pre-1789 and thus revolutionary America) and the 1790s was so great as to make longer-term explanations merely deep background.

The second frame for the Illuminati crisis emphasizes the kind of public religion Morse embraced and thus suggests explanations that stem from a broad cultural shift in the authority granted to that religion. Yet these explanations for the Illuminati moment remain similarly tight in chronological terms. Jonathan Sassi sees the episode as part of the Standing Order's engagement with politics, a conscious fusing of religion and government that reflected the clergy's effort to maintain its position. Amanda Porterfield has emphasized the incident's partisan context in the process of highlighting the partisan content of religious anxiety in the era. Christopher Grasso integrates the episode into a longer span of history, but he too places the concerns of

Morse and his colleague, Timothy Dwight, in the context of those divines' desire to create a moral order for a newly rearranged society, emphasizing, again, the rupture of the 1790s. Taken together, Morse's observers, like Morse, place critical importance on the radical rupture of the creation of the United States in the form of the federal Constitution as the definitive moment for his religion.

Title page, A Sermon, Preached at Charlestown, November 29, 1798, on the Anniversary Thanksgiving in Massachusetts: With an Appendix, Designed to Illustrate Some Parts of the Discourse; Exhibiting Proofs of the Early Existence, Progress, and Deleterious Effects of French Intrigue and Influence in the United States, by Jedidiah Morse, D.D. Pastor of the Church in Charlestown (Boston, 1798). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In both political and religious framings, historians have found a decline in Morse's public form of religion, and their chronological framing implicitly endorses the first of our three explanations listed above, that of a political cause for the decline in religion. But what did the 1790s turn on? The elephantine Revolution in the room is obvious, and it hangs over the historical analysis in such a way as to justify a sense that a great deal was unstable in this difficult decade, certainly enough to explain away Morse's hysterical anxiety. But the connections are perhaps less clear than they might be. Indulge me for a moment in a brief counterfactual: if the colonies had joined together in a new nation under the federal Constitution with the blessing of the British authorities in 1789, peacefully gaining independence and launching fully formed as a new nation, would we need to rethink any of the causes suggested above for explaining the Illuminati crisis? Without the long run up to the American Revolution, the controversies over an Anglican bishop and over the Quebec Act, without the bloody years of warfare, the clergy of the Standing Order in New England might still have been nervous about the intellectual developments of atheists like Paine, the French Revolution would still have been frightening and destabilizing, the new nation (born whole and without blood) would still be struggling to define a new political order including the religious terms of citizenship, and, to put a fine point on the matter, "religion" as Morse defined it would still be largely unchanged from what it had been under the colonial regime. At the time of the Illuminati crisis—though there were clear causes to worry about future trends that were rooted in very recent events—the institutions of Christianity and the institutional practice of theology (though not necessarily the beliefs of the theologians) were in many ways quite similar to what they had been in 1770 or 1760. These perspectives reflect Jon Bulter's oft-quoted observation that the American Revolution was "a profoundly secular event," as well as his persuasive argument that the eighteenth century saw a long increase of institutional Christianity.

In this counterfactual framing, our first explanation, religious decline caused by recent politics, is deeply unsatisfying. It suggests a too-rapid collapse of too powerful a system. Thus we glide to the second explanation: the system was decaying from the inside. Morse's anxiety was the result of the rise of the secular. Here we have a different body of scholarship. Theoretically, at least, once "religion" developed as an intellectual category, it spawned its opposite, secularity. In the words of Charles Taylor, "the shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace." John Lardas Modern suggests that "secularism names a conceptual environment—emergent since at least the Protestant Reformation and early Enlightenment—that has made 'religion' a recognizable and vital thing in the world." Indeed, Bryan Waterman recently made a related version of this argument with respect to the Illuminati crisis quite eloquently, linking it (and Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*) to contests for control of the public sphere.

It is important to note, however, that historians of the secular do *not* posit the decline of religion as a general category, but rather push us to identify the gradual metamorphosis that occurred as an older body of cultural beliefs and practices were first identified as religion and then began to divide into a series of different institutions and practices that we might today recognize in everything from civil religion to moral reform to the effort to spread human rights. In other words, historians of the secular advise us to be very wary of narratives of religious decline and call our attention to the power politics involved in the categorization of some cultural elements as religious and others as secular. Their version of history works much more comfortably with the many versions of dynamic religion from the early republic that do not match Morse's. Here, therefore, is our third explanation: "religion" in the early republic was a dynamic category, encompassing a mixture of different things, populist revivalism, clerical voices, a new form of "secular" culture, and also traditional forms of Christianity. Because this is *not* a history of categorical religious decline and disappearance, but a proper history, a series of developments linked to moments of specific historical transition, it should be possible to chronicle it and show how it either registered the significant changes of the Revolutionary period or resisted them.

Unfortunately, historians of the secular have left us wondering about the role of the American Revolution in the story, and also the integration of this broader version of religion into the stream of time. Discussions of religion's decline and the rise of the secular tend to focus on generalized versions of the cultural and political developments that occurred in the eighteenth century and all of the transformations that tend to be associated with the Age of Revolutions—the rise of a public sphere, the development of individualism, and a new embrace of popular sovereignty. They assume, even assert, the importance of historical contingency and change over time, but they avoid the dirty work such an assertion demands.

Without concrete links to the past, this version of scholarship slips dangerously close to becoming the doppelganger of our second explanation above, in which the course of history outside of religion is nearly irrelevant. The secular was born of elite non-religious (in Morse's definition) intellectual trends before the political crises at the end of the eighteenth century, trends that were then made manifest in those broad-based political changes. (Note Modern's vast and indistinct timing cited above.) Charles Taylor gives great causal weight to a broad phenomenon of deism, and he locates the development of his modern "social imaginary" in the eighteenth-century polite society. But, as Jon Butler has pointed out, Taylor's "history is not for historians," in other words, it lacks the specificity in detail and human action that historians require for effective argument. The upshot of these discussions for those concerned with secularity is that whatever changed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, afterwards people of faith moved in a world where unbelief and belief coexisted, as did religion, secularity, and various modes of public discourse that did or did not value the trained and authorized voice of the clergy. This changed "religion" from a part of the institutional fabric of public life (Morse's "foundations" and "religion") into a realm of thought, self definition, and anxiety in which people individually and collectively articulated their concerns about the new world order. These articulations are extremely useful for understanding the modern era, but unsatisfying for explaining its formation.

Title page, A Sermon, Delivered at the New North Church in Boston, in the Morning, and in the Afternoon at Charlestown, May 9th, 1798: Being the Day Recommended by John Adams, President of the United States of America, for Solemn Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer, by Jedidiah Morse, D.D. Minister of the Congregation in Charlestown (Boston, 1798). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Nonetheless, these powerful intellectual narratives about religion and secularity have transformed how we understand religion and politics in the modern world. So much so that as historians we are certainly capable of recognizing the coexistence of Morse's more narrow version of religion and the broader theoretical category which has secularity as its opposite. Yet our problem remains. For *both* the close chronological readings proposed by historians that find a meaningful transformation at the close of the American Revolution, *and* for the expansive readings of theorists, *something* significant happened during the American Revolution, or the Age of Revolution more generally. This matches an agreement in most other aspects of history, not to mention public discourse, that *somehow* the era was one of definitive change with lasting importance. We just have no real idea what it was when writing about religion.

Connecting the events of the Revolutionary chronology to religion, specifically

to the religion that Morse identified, is not simple. Did the political changes of the Age of Revolution (or, more parochially, the American Revolution) matter to religion? If so, which changes and where? Did the stresses to Morse's religion caused by the Age of Revolution and the long rise of secularism simply build in some sort of historical waiting area until they were able to burst onto the scene in the early republic? Did they matter to anyone along the way? Did listeners to public sermons in 1788, such as Ezra Stiles's oft-cited "The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor," know that they would shortly discard the tired ceremony of public religion for the appeals of secularism, perhaps including new and secular celebrations of what will now be termed civil religion? Were they looking forward to it? If the great wave of secularism and unbelief identified by historians of the secular was slowly growing and being furthered by the development of new modes of public speech, action, and organization during the decades of revolution, why did most of the clergy on both sides of the Atlantic side with their governments in the crisis?

This plodding insistence on timing and immediate causality may coexist uneasily with the great sweep of theory, but granting the broad historical significance of theoretical developments is not the same as explaining how and when that influence was felt. In eras of profound transition—revolutions—such matters become even more important, precisely because the divisions between historical periods often elide them. For historians of religion in the Age of Revolution, a great deal is at stake methodologically in this discussion, because it is ultimately the question of not just how but *whether* the political events of the era had any demonstrable impact on religion, whatever we mean by that term. If so, how, when, and where? If not, how do we account for such dramatic change in the period immediately following it?

Hence the persistent urge for the specific and the connection between the before and the after. This is, in essence, a plea for a full realization of the implications in the third logical proposition above. If religion and its *nouveau riche* cousin, secularity, have not declined in history but are concepts that can be used to track a moving conceptual frame, then this frame should have a history that can be integrated into that of the Age of Revolution. When was Morse's "religion," a limited but identifiable version of the concept, destabilized? The focus on public religion is demanded by the political events implicated. 1750 seems too early. Linda Colley, J.C.D. Clark, and many others have offered interpretations of the *ancien régime* Atlantic world that rely on religious prejudices—those between Protestants and Catholics and also those between various denominations of Protestants—to explain the American crisis. So when was the influence of the rising tide of secularism, of the strength of new, non-religious public spheres felt as a threat by religious communities? 1776? 1787? 1789? 1791? Or do we need a different timeline, one that draws from "religious" history? Was it 1770, when George Whitefield died? 1788, when the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church created a self-consciously national organization? 1798, when Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight insisted that the Illuminati were undermining American society? If the issue is not framed by a narrow insistence on date, what of causality? Were the changes to the idea and

place of religion in society in the early nineteenth century brought about by legal disestablishment (an uneven process by any count)? Were they caused by the rise of republican political ideology and its consequent impact on theology? (This argument suggests a sort of suicide for culturally influential religion, as the causal energy comes from within religious thought itself.) Were they caused by the political power of skepticism and atheism (a more diffuse causality, far harder to date and trace)?

In all of these intellectual constructions, the ties between the specific historical process of revolution (or revolutions) and the anxieties to be perceived in Morse's writing are vague at best. For historians, the chronological rupture of the Revolution is too great. For theorists, the process is too broad to be attached to specific events. Both reflect the kind of generalized sense of change that Morse articulated, but neither integrate it into the era of change that preceded it. The enormity of the transformation posited by theorists of the secular demands historical investigation; the tendency of historians to separate the 1790s from the era before it sidesteps the kind of investigation that would be needed.

This discussion also raises the very intriguing possibility that the cultural and political upheavals of the American Revolution were only coincidental to the profound changes in the place of religion (by any definition) in public life in the new nation in the 1790s. *Could the development of as important a concept as secularity be only coincidentally adjacent and attached only by remote evolutionary ties to the crises of the Age of Revolution?* Here, by our long wandering path, is the question posed by the inescapable Jedidiah Morse's histrionics. A positive answer to that question would invite a significant redefinition of the American Revolution as something minor enough to have had little impact on a remarkably resilient form of religion. Indeed, it would suggest that the political alignments our historical actors cared so much about were all merely noise. This is a proposition that is worthy of more investigation.

One final thought, more political than historical: I have noted that Jedidiah Morse is the darling of conservative Christian nationalists, those who protest too loudly of the orthodox (by which they mean evangelical) Christianity of the "Founding Fathers." The inability of historians, or theorists, to grapple in the macro sense with the historical relationship between religion and the political process in the creation of the United States is, I suspect, one source of the difficulty academic historians have in offering a counter narrative to that of religious decline from the nation's holy founding, a narrative that Morse both helped create and is regularly used to prove. The Christian nationalist narrative is profoundly bad history, and by letting Morse speak for us, and by failing to clarify the history he experienced in more concrete ways, we are left sputtering and ineffectual. A more solid understanding of what we mean by religion, and when and where it responded to a complex political era that *preceded* the pivotal 1790s, may be useful in that highly charged conversation.

Acknowledgments

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Lobsters on the Walls



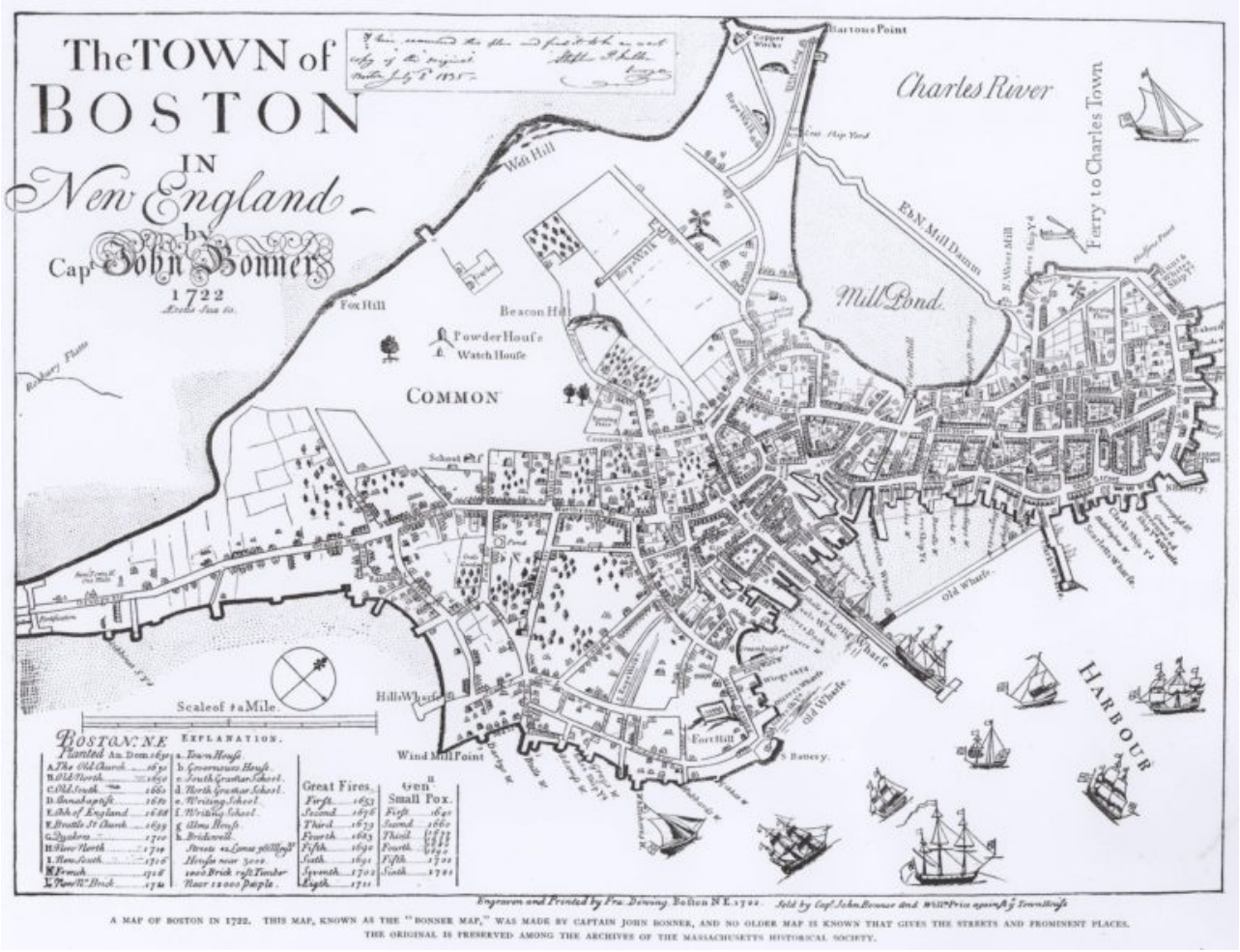
"He exclaimed 'Lobsters! I'll make Cornwallis and his men lobsters!"

Walking the Freedom Trail



Historical memory operates differently in professional military circles.

Big Dig, Little Dig, Hidden Worlds: Boston

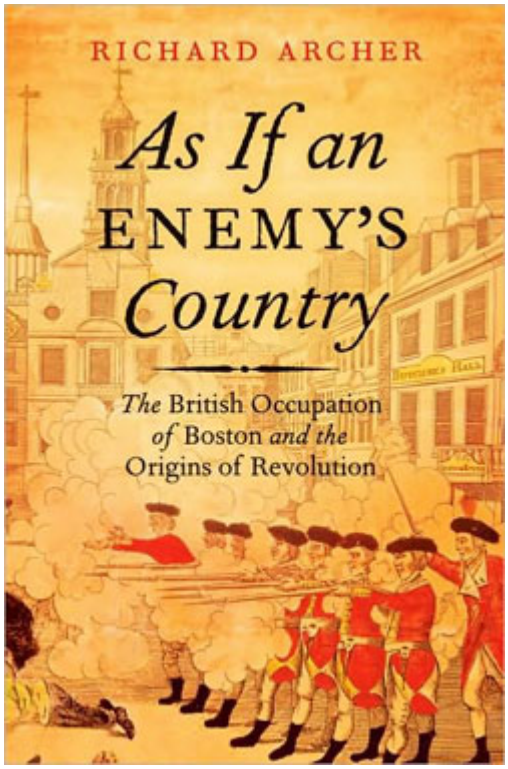


A MAP OF BOSTON IN 1722. THIS MAP, KNOWN AS THE "BONNER MAP," WAS MADE BY CAPTAIN JOHN BONNER, AND NO OLDER MAP IS KNOWN THAT GIVES THE STREETS AND PROMINENT PLACES. THE ORIGINAL IS PRESERVED AMONG THE ARCHIVES OF THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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Boston’s revolution



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Those Separatists who emigrated directly from England and those who had just

left Leyden, Holland, would have been equals in their ability to recognize that whaling could be an immensely profitable business.