



FROM GENTLEMAN'S PISTOL TO EVERYMAN'S RIFLE

Guns, Honor, and Society in Revolutionary Boston



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“And it is enacted by the Council and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, That no rank or station in life, place, employment or office . . . shall excuse or exempt any person from serving in arms for the defense of his country . . .”

-Massachusetts General Court, 1776¹

“As a gentleman was going through Lincoln’s Inn, a few Nights ago, a Fellow seized him by the Collar and dragged him into a Corner, and presenting a Pistol robbed him of his Money, Watch, and Great Coat. On The Gentleman’s begging that he would not take his Great Coat, alledging it was cold, the Robber replied, for that very Reason I have the more Occasion for it.”

-The Essex Gazette, Tuesday, May 4th, 1773²

During the unrest in revolutionary Boston, Massachusetts, social distinctions were often blurred, as Old World ideals were challenged in a New World context. Boston’s gun culture constituted one such example. As the colony of Massachusetts Bay moved ever closer toward a war with Great Britain, the use of firearms constituted a military necessity in the defense of the people. At the same time, cultural perceptions of honor colored the practice of personal armament, allowing those of the better sort to carry a weapon to defend their honor, and condemning those of the lower sort who carried a weapon as criminals. The colony’s attempted balancing of these two competing forces provides a unique view of the tumult of colonial life during the early stages of the American Revolution. The result of this competition can be viewed through the creation of a new definition of honor in individual armament.

For most of human history, weapons have been a luxury of the elite. A weapon is, by definition, a tool designed to allow one to exert force over another. It is only natural, then, that those people in positions of societal power would seek to control the creation, distribution, and employment of weapons. For those who wished to remain politically powerful in their societies, the maintenance of weapons, and the people who wielded them, proved vital. In the European tradition, social hierarchies were developed specifically around the use of weapons.³ Those who were trained for combat, both provided with weapons and themselves molded into living instruments of combat, came to occupy a higher social tier than those without access to weapons. Class and personal armament were therefore deeply intertwined in these societies. In their colonization of the Americas, European settlers were forced to abandon their weapon-based social hierarchies in the face of a new environment which challenged their social institutions and encouraged a dramatic shift in the influence of weaponry and social status.⁴

The effects of this new environment on Old World traditions can be seen clearly in the American War for Independence. The physical expulsion of English governance by the colonies has been deeply studied as a metaphor for the American expulsion of some underlying European social institutions that were ill-suited to the American environment. Those institutions that remained were made to adapt to the new demands of American life. The American story consists not only of European practices that were let go, but also those which were kept. The molding of European ways of life to fit a New World context presented many challenges which European settlers were forced to overcome.

This paper investigates the challenges that arose from the American attempt to preserve the tradition of personal armament. Through the careful analysis of the media coverage, supply chains, and legislative records about guns and gunpowder in Boston, Massachusetts on the eve of

the American Revolution, the ways in which changing social dynamics influenced personal armament can be explored. Boston's political prominence within the unfolding Imperial Crisis placed the town at the heart of the looming conflict; Boston became a fertile breeding ground for dissident thought. Boston's reactions to the crisis were chronicled in the town's newspapers, economic practices, and law codes; the debate surrounding firearm ownership in the period reflected these reactions. The most active period of civil and political unrest before the war took place from the passage of the Tea Act on May 10, 1773 to the convening of the Continental Congress and the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Within this context, shifting class relations became a reality of everyday life. How and why people armed themselves reflected these changes. As Boston approached revolution, its decision to expand its militias and arm the common man was born of a balancing of military needs and these potential problems; the concerns of Boston's citizens over the arming of non-elites, evident in the legislative banning of different groups of people from militia service, represented deep-rooted fears concerning gender, class, crime, and race. The investigation of Boston's gun culture provides a window into these blurred social distinctions resulting from the relative chaos of an impending revolution.

A Public Gun Culture

Some Bostonians of the time would have seen this drama unfold in New England's newspapers. The print media of the time provides a unique insight into the daily world of Boston's firearm trade. By observing the kind of language used in the selling and use of guns and gunpowder, it is easier to understand how and why people bought guns in the city of Boston during this Imperial Crisis and the start of the Revolution. Though these stories only report on a

very small fraction of gun owners and users in the period, they are the same stories which many people, commoners and gentry alike, would have read. The language used in these accounts can therefore be viewed as indicative of larger socio-cultural patterns beyond the stories themselves.

Stories of life in England were routinely reprinted in Boston's newspapers, reflecting a shared economic culture.⁵ Boston's reliance on British manufacturing established British society as the cultural superior; Boston was an outlying province of the metropolitan center in London. Due to this relationship, news articles in Boston's newspapers dealing with firearms in England represent a valuable view of what values guns represented in the cultural capital of the empire. It is through these accounts of English society, reprinted in Boston's newspapers, that one can see how gun ownership and social rank related to each other in England. The social values promoted in these articles would have been very familiar to the colonists and consonant with the social order of Boston, too.

In newspaper articles from England, reprinted in Boston, only the gentry or members of the military were represented as worthy to carry firearms, while armed members of the lower orders were depicted as dishonorable criminals. This trend can be seen in almost every account of guns in England in Boston's newspapers during the period. One article in *The Massachusetts Gazette and The Boston Weekly Newsletter* reported a "very unhappy affair" from London, wherein it was recorded that "[t]wo rich merchants, relations and intimates" happened to pass one another on the road. One of them decided to play a prank on the other one, who was asleep in his carriage, by pressing his pistol against his sleeping friend's chest in a mock-robbery. Upon awakening to the suspected robber, the man in the carriage "seized his pistol, and blew out his friend's brains."⁶ The presentation of a fake robbery suggested the use of firearms in the dishonorable context of crime, while the irony of the story was derived from the fact that the

villain was actually a wealthy man of honor. The sadness of the story came from the misrecognition of an honorable man as dishonorable, which resulted in his death. Such articles captured the varying social distinctions surrounding firearm use in England at the time.

The gentlemanly aspects of firearm culture were not unique to the metropolis of London; they were recorded in other provincial centers as well. A second article from *The Boston Post-Boy* detailed “a duel... in Dublin, between Colonel Blauiere, Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant, and Beauchamp Bagnell, Esq; member for the country of Catherlough.” It would appear that these men, too, carried firearms, though “[t]hey fired their pistols without effect.”⁷ The same paper details another London Duel “between Lord Townsend and the Earl of Bellamont” where, “armed with small swords, and a case of pistols,” the Earl received a fatal gunshot wound in the lower stomach.⁸ The accounts continued in similar fashion throughout publications in the period. While interesting, these stories also suggest a curious pattern in the social significance of firearms. Honor again seemed to play an important role in determining who could carry a firearm in English society. Stories like these suggested that to be honorable and to be an elite were often one in the same. Such a connection between individual wealth and honor implicates the right to carry a gun as a privilege of the elites.

These patterns in England are very clear: firearms—especially pistols—were a symbol of status and honor reserved for members of the better sort. The need to defend oneself and one’s personal property from thieves during travel motivated the use of firearms in the first story. The need to defend one’s honor through a duel necessitated the ownership and use of firearms in the other cases. While it is clear from these accounts that the gentry of England preferred pistols in this period, it was also reasonable for disputes to be settled “in a Gentleman-like manner” with

longer guns.⁹ Therefore, firearms of all sizes could, in London at least, have been considered symbols of gentlemanly conduct

This recognition of guns as a privilege of the elite seems prominent in English society, a society which Boston aspired to emulate. The cultural principles embodied by these stories were promoted in the American colonies as well. In the publication of a letter from Gloucester, Massachusetts, a “melancholy affair” was revealed—a suicide that involved a man killing himself with his own pistol during an argument when he began to lose. In this event, which was witnessed “by the servants of the house,” the man valued of his honor above even his own life¹⁰ While the article omits names and any other identifying personal information, it can be surmised that the presence of house servants indicated the owner of the pistol as a member of the social elite. This article, and many others like it, suggest a link between pistols and gentlemanly honor.

One of the clearest representations of the gentrified values associated with firearms comes from a personal advertisement in *The Boston Gazette*. The placer of the advertisement described in detail an ornate “silver mounted Pistol, with a Lion’s Face on the Butt, a Trophy Side-piece, Coat of Arms on the Thumb piece,” and the engravings of four griffin heads, which had been stolen from him. He described the pistol as representing “those principals of Honour and Generosity” which all “worthy Gentleman should prefer.”¹¹ The placer of the advertisement mocks the thief’s honor by feigning gratitude and gentlemanly respect, while offering to the thief the other pistol of the pair. The catch, however, was that “the Pair shall be the Palm of Victory” in a duel. In essence, the thief’s honor and gentlemanly manner is being challenged in this advertisement. The original owner of the pistol made an implicit argument that the pistol could only belong to an honorable man of status; if the thief refused the duel, then he was dishonorable, ungentlemanly, and unfit to carry a pistol.

It was understood by those in eighteenth-century Boston that honor was a performance, not a stagnant social distinction. By challenging the honor of the thief, the gentleman was both defending his own honor in the customary way of calling a duel and berating the honor of the thief with mockery and sarcasm. The gun in this case became a tool of establishing the honor of the gentleman, while at the same time representing the criminality of the thief. In the same story, the pistol was at once a symbol of honor and dishonor, with the main distinction between the two residing with the owner of the weapon's social status. When the gentleman held the pistol, it was a symbol of his own elite rank and worthiness; when the thief held the pistol, it became a symbol of dishonor and cowardice.

A Boston reprint of a story from Philadelphia directly revealed fears about the arming of the lower sorts and those deemed dishonorable. The *Boston Evening-Post* article from August 2nd, 1773 warned readers that Mr. John Mifflin, Jr., was approached “by a Man dressed in a white Jacket and Hat flop'd before, who taking the Reigns of his Chair in his Hand, clapp'd a Pistol to his Breast, telling him to make no Noise, or he would shoot him”¹² This post illustrated the danger of armed men of poor character. In this story, the ownership of the pistol by the criminal constituted a societal threat, one which likely reflected social concerns about gun ownership at the time.

Alongside the fear of crime was the fear of incompetence. This perception can be seen in *The Boston Post-Boy*'s coverage of an accidental shooting in Baltimore, wherein “a small boy, about eight years of age, son of Mr. William Barney of this town, was playing with a pistol, which unfortunately happened to be loaded, it accidentally discharged itself,” killing Mr. Barney.¹³ Though lacking a criminal element, stories such as these represent another fear of colonial society: the fear that the less-honorable members of society were unable to safely or

responsibly use firearms. Such stories promoted the idea that firearm use be restricted to men of honor, be they part of the better sort or appropriately trained by the militia or military.

Depictions of honorability, competency, wealth, and social affluence were represented in gun advertisements as well. Pistols and other firearms were frequently advertised alongside other expensive imports, such as “Officers Shoulder-Knots, gold Gorgets, silk Sashes, with every Sort and Kind of gold and silver Laces.”¹⁴ Items such as these were clearly accoutrements of wealth and status, indicating the target audience of these advertisements. Pistols and other firearms sold alongside these wares seem to have been marketed toward the gentry. Some advertisements openly name their market, as gunsmiths like John Herrington enticed readers to visit their shops “[w]here Gentlemen may have Guns either Made or Mended, in the neatest and best manner.”¹⁵ Another gunsmith, John Whitten, informed “the Gentlemen of the Militia in the Country” of his services in making, repairing, and selling “Guns, Pistols, &c.”¹⁶ The makers and sellers of guns, it would seem, tailored their business toward the wealthy “Gentlemen.” This implies the aristocracy constituted the primary private contractors of the gunsmiths’ services, while these advertisements continued to uphold the ideal of firearms being a symbol of status for wealthy men of the gentry.

This ideal, however, was not upheld quite so consistently in practice. Within these same papers, a more radical and less socially-regimented social undercurrent can be viewed through the portrayal of firearms and personal armament. After 1765, public tension was beginning to manifest itself in the form of articles calling for the arming of citizen-soldiers in the militia. One such article, an order of the Provincial Congress signed by John Hancock in 1774, mandated that “each of the minute-men not already provided therewith, should be immediately equipped with an effective fire-arm, bayonet, pouch, knapsack, thirty rounds of cartridges and ball and that they

be disciplined three times a week.”¹⁷ Public fears surrounding the occupation of Boston by British regulars in 1768 necessitated the arming of the militia. The militia force in question, however, was not comprised of wealthy “Gentlemen” or trained soldiers. Instead, this was a group of carpenters and cobblers, chandlers and merchants, laborers and tradesmen of every sort.¹⁸ In short, these “minute-men” were commoners of the middling sort. While those living outside of the cities were more likely to own a firearm of some sort, Hancock’s concern was the relative lack of personal armament within the province among the lower and middle classes in Boston. The necessity of arming militias demanded that many considered unworthy of owning guns took up arms. This new imperative challenged the elite view of firearms as a part of the colonial honor economy.

Nowhere was this clearer than in an appalling “Instance of Female Heroism not to be equaled by either ancient or modern History,” published in the *Boston Post-Boy*. The article reprinted a letter from New York in 1773.¹⁹ It told of a young woman, Miss T, who received a counterfeited letter shaming her character and honor. She thought that this letter was written by an ex-lover of hers, though in reality it was written by a third person, an “Enemy to both Parties.” Miss T, therefore, sent for her former suitor and, upon his calling, locked him in her dressing room to punish his “Insolence and Cruelty.” She then presented the man with “a Brace of Pistols, and insisted on his taking one.” Despite his protest, Miss T forced a duel and won by shooting the man through the elbow. She did this knowing full well that “the World will, no Doubt, censure me, and call my Conduct Madness,” and that she would be condemned while the man would be acquitted.

Miss T’s story represented an interesting take on a larger colonial American gun culture. While Miss T could have indeed existed and performed her duel, her tale may well have been

written as a satire of mainstream honor culture and gender norms. Guns and duels were tools of the “Gentleman.” By recognizing the “Madness” of her actions, she fully understood that she was pushing against the status quo. Her example is one of people outside of the traditional armed male gentry using firearms to defend not just their physical selves, but their honor as well. Miss T’s duel represents her understanding of guns as a social equalizer, while her final warning “never to injure the Reputation of a Woman; for the loss of it must, if she has any Sense of Shame, be followed with a Loss of Life” after the duel suggests a bitterness that a duel does not vindicate a woman’s shame as it does for a man. Miss T’s story was one of her quest to restore her honor through a duel, though she ultimately finds that a woman could never truly restore her honor through martial combat. In doing so, this article represents the gendered nature of both honor culture and firearms within the period.

Eighteenth-century newspapers represented guns in English society as a marker of elite rank and personal honor. The honorability and wealth represented by pistols was attractive to Boston’s aristocracy. Gunsmiths and merchants exploited this by writing advertisements which made their wares appear more noble while reinforcing these values to Boston’s elite. Fears over Imperial conflict, however, provided a stimulus for politicians to call the common populace to arms, without regards to the social status of the militiamen. The defense of the colony ultimately overrode the importance of maintaining a class distinction in the arming of men. While someone of the better sort was born honorable, a commoner could still gain access to firearms, a symbol of honor, through militia service. This development represented a fundamental shift in gun culture in America. In contrast to England, the common man could have obtained some of the privileges of an honorable man through participation as an armed soldier within the militia.

The Colonial Firearm Economy

How, then, did these non-traditional gun owners manage to arm themselves? Where did their firearms come from? To determine how guns fit into Boston's social context, one must understand the history of the colonial American firearm trade. By observing which groups controlled the production and distribution of firearms and gunpowder, and which regulations, scarcities, and other constraints influenced the supply side of the firearm economy, a clearer image of gun ownership in the period can be developed.

Early in colonial British North American history, firearm use developed as a necessity of frontier life, as “[a]rms were essential to secure food, and of equal importance in providing security.”²⁰ Because of the environment the colonists found themselves in, the production and distribution of firearms and gunpowder rapidly became one of the most important facets of colonial life. The necessity of these weapons to the colonists ensured that “the gunsmith became one of the earliest trained professionals in American society,” with the first recorded tradesmen in the field existing in Virginia by 1628, Massachusetts by 1630, and Maryland by 1635.²¹ These professionals, however, did not produce guns; instead, these craftsmen maintained pieces imported from Europe. The fragility of the early firearms on the American frontier made repair a profitable business, though the British colonies lacked the resources and infrastructure to produce many of their own guns. Instead, most firearms were imported from Europe, and were often modified to better suit North American demands by American gunsmiths.

What few guns were made in the colonies were non-standard, as gunsmiths operated under their own agency to produce individual weapons rather than large production runs. Due to the lack of a guild system in the American colonies to govern and standardize the production of firearms in the period, every weapon was a unique reflection of the talents, or lack thereof, of its

maker. These locally-produced guns—generally rifles and fowling pieces—were few and far between. The slow rate of production and non-standard construction of these weapons made sourcing and using large numbers of long guns nearly impossible for colonial governments. The various bore sizes, unique to each individual gun, meant a different charge of shot and powder was required for each firearm. This made supplying ammunition to local militias armed with American-made pieces a logistically unfeasible task for any governing body. There were two solutions to this problem; these militiamen could have been furnished with standardized European imports, or they could have been made responsible for purchasing their own shot and powder.

Both philosophies were practiced throughout the colonial period by provincial governments, though they each shared a common aspect: a reliance on European industry. If a colony wished to furnish its militia with standard military arms, it could have only done so by importing the weapons from Europe. If a colony's armed population wished to use their American-made rifles, they relied on European gunpowder. Even those few local gunsmiths who produced their own firearms relied on quality steel and brass from Europe. Boston was no exception; in fact, New England's close ties with Great Britain ensured that Boston's residents followed "the lead of English gunmakers" as they continued to use the British-manufactured smoothbore "as their major weapon longer than those in the middle or southern colonies."²² Boston, more than many other colonial American cities, relied on British imports to arm itself. In a geopolitical sense, the gun trade in colonial America was monopolized by Europe in the early colonial period.

In the later eighteenth century, firearms in circulation from colonial warfare on the continent helped to alleviate a scarcity of personal firearms. The limiting factor to wide-spread

armament in this period, as it had been since the gun's introduction to the Americas, was gunpowder.²³ The American colonies had little tradition of manufacturing their own powder. In fact, only Pennsylvania was "fortunate in having the most famous and, possibly, the only operating powder mill in the colonies—at least until May, 1775."²⁴ The necessity of quality gunpowder in this period cannot be overstated. General Thomas Gage's removal of gunpowder from the Boston magazine in September of 1774, which sparked the famous Powder Alarm; the march on the powder magazines in Lexington and Concord in April of 1775, and the Gunpowder Incident in Virginia of the same year, propagated by the removal of powder from the Williamsburg magazine: all constitute direct military actions intended to disarm the British American populace. British officials understood that it was far more efficient and effective to control the gunpowder, rather than the firearms, due to the relative scarcity of powder in the colonies.

The lack of gunpowder in the colonies, therefore, represented a major dilemma for provincial governments of the time. Many governing bodies, such as the Massachusetts Provincial Legislature, addressed this scarcity by mandating that "no soldier or non-commission'd officer, shall unnecessarily discharge or fire his gun, on a training-, or muster-day, without the express order or license of his superior officer" in its third session of 1775.²⁵ Even storing gunpowder was extremely difficult for colonial governments. Little regulation existed to police the storing of powder and the maintenance of powder magazines. In Massachusetts, the General Court found in 1772 that Boston's magazines were "unsafe for lodging and keeping the great quantities of gun-powder which are commonly place therein."²⁶ In conditions like those in the Boston magazine, it was not uncommon for stored powder to become damp from the New England rains, effectively ruining what little powder may have been stored.

How could Boston effectively arm its militia, especially as potential a war loomed on the horizon? Historically, the colonies had relied on British support for colonial warfare. While American colonists constituted the shock troops for many conflicts on the continent, they carried British-manufactured arms and ammunition. In previous North American conflicts, Boston's militias, though somewhat rougher than the British regulars, still operated largely as an extension of the British army.

Within the context of the 1770's, however, the relationship between England and her colonies was being called into question. Colonial militias now trained to combat British tyranny. This development represented an entirely new challenge to colonial governments. As war with England became a potential reality, it was evident that such a war would have to be fought without British material support. Without arms and ammunition from England, how would Boston be able to support itself militarily?

Gunpowder rationing became increasingly common as the Imperial Crisis deepened. Nonimportation agreements within the Atlantic colonies contributed to the conservation of materials of all kinds, in the hopes of breaking Boston's economic dependency on English manufacturing. While this philosophy applied to gunpowder as well, its overwhelming military value and difficulty to produce necessitated some exceptions. While private citizens were ordered to conserve their powder as much as possible, the General Court continued ordering gunpowder from England. In the desperate search for more powder, Pennsylvania attempted the widespread manufactory of its own gunpowder, an ambition which floundered due to a lack of established facilities and the insistence of the colonists to purchase imported powder.²⁷ Ordinarily, however, the American colonies were entirely dependent on European imports to supply their need for gunpowder.

In this context, colonial merchants assumed new power and prestige. Because the American colonies relied on European imports to effectively arm themselves, those who controlled the importation of firearms to the American colonies effectively controlled the gun trade in America. More acutely, those who controlled the importation of gunpowder in the American colonies controlled the gun trade.

The new vulnerability of the colonies, exacerbated by the intervention of the crown in the American powder trade, prompted Massachusetts to begin procuring gunpowder for its militia. Traditionally, this responsibility fell on the British government; in the context of the Imperial Crisis, however, nonimportation agreements, boycotts of British goods, and selectmen's orders reveal concerns over who should be in control of the gunpowder trade. To most Americans at the time, the arms trade was controlled by the king. The *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts* in 1774 reflect that the legislature aimed to purchase "five Hundred Barrels of Gun-Powder, for his Majesty's Service."²⁸ This language was commonplace for the time. "His Majesty" owned the gunpowder, at least conceptually. In a time of growing distrust in royal authority, this fact further inflamed tensions. Fears of royal control over the colonial arms trade were not unfounded. In October, 1774 King George III "had forbidden the exportation of gunpowder to the American colonies."²⁹ In May of the same year, Parliament's Boston Port Act effectively closed Boston Harbor to all trade, including powder shipments. With these actions, the British government forcefully limited the colonists' ability to arm themselves.

These circumstances constituted a historical irony: while the colonists were undoubtedly preparing for hostilities with England, they continued to petition the king for military supplies. Some of this paradox can be resolved with the understanding that, to many of the colonists in

Boston, King George III was still their king. While the British Parliament was seen by many patriots as unjustly trampling the liberties of the American people, hope remained that the king was on the side of justice out of his covenant to protect the people.³⁰ As the crisis continued to unfold, many colonists continued to register complaints with the king in the hopes that he would recognize the injustice and continue to protect his people. The Massachusetts General Court, therefore, was inclined to ask His Majesty for the gunpowder they needed to defend against British tyranny. This tyranny, at least initially, was believed to have come from Parliament, not the crown.

These sentiments changed, however, as the Imperial Crisis deepened, and Americans began to associate even the crown with the infringements of their liberties. Though nuanced, this development played an important role in subsequent hostilities and, ultimately, the American Revolution. Once the colonists believed that the crown no longer had the colonies' best interests in mind, the king appeared to have broken his covenant of protection.³¹ This apparent breach permitted the colonies a degree of independence in using what arms they did have. No longer were the colonies focused on petitioning the king to remedy their situation; instead, patriots felt justified in securing their own liberties. This ultimately forced the General Court to investigate other means of gathering arms and providing for colonial defense.

How, then, did the provincial government of Massachusetts respond to this development? While the colony was eventually able to gather enough military material to successfully contribute to a war for independence, there was no shortage of difficulties for the legislature to overcome in reaching that point. The most immediate of these issues was to determine how Massachusetts would wrest control of gun and powder distribution from royal authorities. The legislature began enacting resolves to directly oversee the powder resources of the colony, rather

than relying on royal officials as they had previously. On Thursday, September 6th, 1776, the Massachusetts House of Representatives ordered that “Capt. Brown, Mr. Watson and Major Fuller, be a committee to inspect all the gunpowder that shall be brought to the Commissary-General’s store from several powder mills.”³² Such an order demonstrates the existence of domestic powder mills that had been established since 1775. More pointedly, this resolve represents the Massachusetts government taking over of a role generally performed by royal officials. On July 1st of the same year, a little over two months since Lexington and Concord and the commencement of the war, this role of American legislatures as the new arbiters of gunpowder is suggested by New Hampshire’s request that the Massachusetts House of Representatives “lend that colony [New Hampshire] a few cannon, and 30 or 40 barrels of gunpowder.”³³ This form of intercolonial cooperation was born of a need for guns and gunpowder in the midst of an Imperial Crisis. As the American colonies shifted into open rebellion against the English crown, local governments were forced into the role that the larger imperial governmental system would have played in distributing guns and gunpowder. Rather than petition His Majesty for powder, the colonies sought out a new method of arming themselves: they began to seek each other for aid.

How did these shifting roles of governance affect how colonists viewed the social status of guns? The scarcity of gunpowder defined personal and military armament in the period and necessitated governmental provision in the event of a sustained military engagement. The political struggle between the colonies and England constituted a new crisis in British American history. As conflict loomed over Boston, the General Court was unable to rely on the traditional model of military armament supported by British trade, endorsed by the British government. After the king’s ban on American powder imports, the Court could no longer petition even the

crown for support. As such, the legislature was forced to take on the role of supplying the colony with the firearms it needed to win a war without British support. This change meant that Bostonians looked to their provincial government for firearm provisions, and that provincial government, in turn, looked to their citizenry for military participation and towns for material support. From this point onward, Boston's gun culture was managed by local authorities, not British officials. Likewise, concerns over supporting an armed populace reflected local, rather than British fears.

The Role of Government

The question of who could and could not wield firearms in revolutionary Boston goes far beyond the direct control of the firearm economy, however. Other factors directly facilitated the ability of one to arm himself, which had little to do with the scarcity of gunpowder or the expense of personal weaponry. Even when powder was plentiful, and guns were cheap, certain categories of people were barred from participating in the armed citizenry. The role of government intimately shaped the role of personal armament in the period.

New England had long demanded that its residents take up arms; it was a history fraught with concerns about who should be allowed to carry a gun. In periods of colonial warfare, armed men were busily engaged in defending their homes or carrying out imperial ambitions on the continent. During periods of domestic peace, however, the arming of the lower orders raised a great deal of concern. As historians Lee Kennett and James LaVerne Anderson argue, it was thought that unless these lower orders were kept “constantly engaged against foreign enemies, they would seek with their newfound force to usurp the position of their betters at home.”³⁴ These fears permeated the thoughts of many in the Atlantic colonies and highlight an important

piece of American gun culture: in times of war, social distinctions were often overlooked in the interest of mutual defense. Boston in particular represented a vital military asset to the British Empire. Historian Carl Bridenbaugh writes that in 1747, the need for an armed military watch in the city saw the mass conscription of poor apprentices and servants, at a cost of forty shillings or more to their respective masters.³⁵ Without a foreign threat to stand against, however, American governing officials worried more about domestic threats.

In the early years of the American colonies, foreign threats were common. Indeed, in the earliest of these years, the natural environment alone could have been considered a foreign army, bent on the destruction of the colonies. Gentlemen and commoners were armed; slaves and masters alike carried guns with which to brave the frontier of the alien continent of North America.³⁶ The most constant threat to these early colonies, be it physical or psychological, were raids by the numerous Native American tribes already living on the land. In these early days of British habitation in the New World, firearms represented security to the colonists and colonial European superiority to the indigenous populations. Thus, the original European idea “that only gentlemen had the privilege to bear arms” was initially replaced by the distinction that only European settlers had the right to bear arms.³⁷ While personal armament may have been a privilege of the elite in European society, early firearm use in British-North America was a privilege of free white males.³⁸

As conflict between the British government and colonial institutions developed, many colonies, including Massachusetts Bay, began rearming their colonial militias. On Monday, June 3rd, 1776, the Massachusetts House of Representatives reviewed a petition from the selectmen of Rehoboth asking for the replacement of borrowed military supplies, as “one hundred weight of gun-powder was taken out of their town stock,” along with “the minute men, on the 19th of April

last, with twenty pounds of powder, sixteen pounds of lead, and sixty-four flints” by “order of the General Court.”³⁹ These materials were used April 19th, 1775 at Lexington and Concord. The Massachusetts House of Representatives organized the use of Rehoboth’s military supplies and militiamen to defend the powder stores in Lexington and Concord from the British regulars. It is clear by this and similar accounts that the Massachusetts government was levying powder, ammunition, arms, and militiamen from towns to address possible conflict with the English since at least the spring of 1775. American colonial governments in this stage of the crisis aimed to take charge of the production and distribution of arms. In this case, the Massachusetts government successfully supplied the first military engagement of the war, suggesting the capability of colonial governments in allocating powder and arms.

This colonial control of the firearm economy primarily sought to field a successful fighting force to counter the British threat. Just over a month after receiving the petition from the selectmen of Rehoboth, the Massachusetts House of Representatives resolved that “all the militia take proper care to acquire military skill, and be well prepared for defense by being each man provided with one pound of good gun-powder, and four pounds of ball, fitted to his gun.”⁴⁰ This resolve, targeted toward the selectmen of various towns, made local authorities responsible for arming a fighting force. The Massachusetts General Court held a position of leadership in raising, supporting, and fielding the militia. In this context, however, the General Court did so without the material, managerial, or legal support of the British government. This development was cemented later in 1776 with the Court’s resolve that, upon the mustering of the militia, troops were to march to the aid of the Continental Army. Each man was to be “armed with a good Firelock, Bullet Pouch and Powder Horn, or Cartridge Box, a Bayonet, Cutlass, or Hatchet, and twenty Bullets fitted to their Gun.”⁴¹ It is clear from the legislation passed during this period

that the Massachusetts legislature assumed full control over the militia in this period. In doing so, they established white, protestant, able-bodied men who were politically revolutionary as those worthy to carry a gun.

While the General Court positioned itself to regulate the militias, supplying the weapons needed for an effective fighting force proved to be a more difficult challenge. Militiamen were encouraged to furnish their own firearms if they had them. Those that joined the militia from rural settings sometimes had guns for self-defense and hunting. Those that came from Boston and other urban settings, however, were far less likely to possess a firearm. It was then up to the selectmen of each town to provide arms for those joining the militia. Guns were borrowed from neighboring colonies, leased from wealthy aristocrats, or purchased from local and foreign gunsmiths by these towns. Most often, however, the Massachusetts selectmen went to their citizenry directly, offering to buy guns with payment “for them out of the treasury of [Massachusetts], by warrant from the council.”⁴² This last method was without colonial precedent; under British control, the provincial government was permitted to levy the arms they needed from its citizens without payment if they were unable to raise the arms by other means. As the war progressed, captured British weapons were increasingly incorporated into the provincial armories. Regardless of where these weapons came from, there were seldom enough guns to fully support the ranks of the militia.

These ranks, however, were not open to everyone. The idea of non-white colonists, Indians, African slaves, or women joining the ranks of the armed citizenry rarely sat well with the governing authorities of the time. Even by 1776, when Massachusetts raced to recruit as many militia members as possible, special exemptions were made by the legislature to ensure that “Indians, negroes and molatoes, shall not be held to take up arms.”⁴³ Such resolves

highlight both the racial and social hierarchy of Revolutionary Boston and the power of firearm regulation. This power worked in the other direction as well. Just as the General Court endeavored to bar some from participating in the militia, it instituted a draft for others. In doing so, the Massachusetts legislature provided a clear account that the sorts of people it wanted to wield firearms are “all the able-bodied, male, persons within this state... from sixteen years of age, and upward, exempting as aforesaid [see previous citation].”⁴⁴ With those exceptions—namely Indians, negroes, and mulattos—in mind, the resolve also made it clear that “no rank or station in life, place, employment, or office... shall excuse or exempt any persons from serving in arms for the defense of his country.”⁴⁵ Through these orders, the Massachusetts government represented the sole authority in sponsoring the temporary gun-ownership of many in the lower and middling classes through the militia, while also reinforcing the exclusion of firearm use based on the social categories of race, gender, age, and physical capabilities.

While the legislation regarding the militia explicitly awarded gun rights to some while it excluded others, the expense of guns and gunpowder at the time made militia service a tempting avenue for some to gain access to firearms. One who could not afford his own arms need not have worried in this period, as the selectmen of each town were “impoverished and directed to impress arms for such persons as shall be appointed as foresaid, and are unable to procure them for themselves.”⁴⁶ It fell on the town selectmen to provide arms and equipment to those who were unable to furnish their own. This obligation to provide for the troops in turn placed a burden on the towns and may have represented a weakness in the ability of the legislature to fully support an armed populace. The General Court was willing to reimburse the towns out of the state treasury, but unable to directly provide the guns required themselves.

The willingness of the Massachusetts legislature to reimburse the selectmen for these guns “out of the treasury of this state” carried distinct social power in the realm of America’s gun culture. By agreeing to provide guns to the militia at the expense of the state, a message was sent that any free white male over the age of sixteen who was willing to join the militia was worthy of armament in the eyes of the government; conversely, such an action also implicitly argued that anyone who did not fit that mold was not worthy of carrying arms. This resolve also made firearms and gunpowder available to a wide range of people who would have never before had access to them. Implements traditionally reserved for the gentry were now given away to members of every class by the state, ultimately paid for by the town or provincial government.

In provisioning the militia, however, the Massachusetts legislature did not endeavor to change gun culture in America. Following the precedent set by earlier colonial wars on the continent, the General Court armed the populace to combat a broad threat with every intention of repossessing those guns as hostilities with the English subsided. It was understood that “after the person for whose use such arms were taken shall return from the campaign, they shall be entitled to receive for the hire of each gun, the sum of four shillings.”⁴⁷ In other words, some of those who contributed their guns to the war effort wanted them back after the conflict, rather than payment from the state treasury. When the soldier with such a firearm returned from combat, he was to be given a sum of four shillings to have the firearm returned to its owner. The need for the selectmen to pay soldiers to return their borrowed guns implies a problem with militiamen keeping their weapons even after returning from combat. This concern was echoed in the policy that a soldier or non-commissioned officer was not to be paid for their service “until he shall produce a certificate from the selectmen of the town, expressing either that he found his own arms, or that the arms delivered him by such selectmen have been returned by him, or were

unavoidably lost.”⁴⁸ The willingness of the Massachusetts government to provide arms for its militias should not be mistaken for charity or a will to change the preexisting social order; its decision to do so was based purely in the practical need to fight and win a war.

Regardless of the intent, the resolve of Massachusetts and other colonial governments to subsidize firearms and powder for militia use both increased the number of guns in circulation at this time through redistribution and gave a legislative backing to the notion that members of all socio-economic strata could wield a firearm. Despite this trend happening during earlier conflicts, the nature of this decision is unique in its context. While the actions of the local governments raising militias are not unique to Imperial Crisis and Revolution, the context of these developments gives these legislative actions more significance in the development of an American gun culture. The very nature of the Imperial Crisis and Revolution called into question previously existing social and political structures of power. The impact of firearm legislation in this time was not that it simply armed the public, but that it armed the public during a time of great societal change. While larger questions about the role of colonial governance and traditional European social structures of class were being called into question on the Revolutionary stage, a large group of people outside of the societal elite in Boston were encouraged by their local government to take up arms. This was a notion which had until then been too expensive, and potentially socially destructive, to consider without the backing of the British Empire.

Conclusion:

The question of how a changing American gun culture related to the larger context of the Imperial Crisis and Independence is a complex one. Traditionally, European ideas of personal

armament as a privilege of the gentry governed the lives of those who could afford to abide those rules. While early settlers and frontiersmen relied on guns and gunpowder for subsistence and self-defense, the urbanites of Boston tended to aspire to the English model of society. While intermittent bouts of colonial warfare galvanized the aristocracy to forsake traditional gun culture for the benefit of military advantage and mutual defense, those allowed into the militias were limited and the status quo returned with the cessation of hostilities.

It was not until the new socio-political context of the Imperial Crisis and the Revolution that the traditional view of firearms as a luxury of the elite in civilized society came into question. The production of firearms and gunpowder, while primarily dominated by European markets, increasingly became the concern of the provincial governments in this time. Control over the gun trade, and especially the powder trade, began to slip from English control into American control. Though the British attempted to exert their full authority over the arms trade by refusing to import gunpowder in the colonies, experiments in domestic production, however unproductive they turned out to be, represent a newfound interest in colonial self-reliance. The ability for a colony to produce its own arms and ammunition bolstered a new colonial ideology of militarily-attained liberty.

The colony of Massachusetts Bay aimed to control not only the production of firearms, but their use as well. By redefining the colonial militias, the Massachusetts government was able to legislate who was and was not fit to bear arms in the defense of the state. In doing so, the government unwittingly dealt a sharp blow to traditional European class structures by allowing men of all social stations to serve together. Rather a luxury of the rich, gun ownership became associated with a free white masculinity, for they were who could participate in civic armament.

The new availability of firearms coincided with heated rhetoric about liberties, both political and personal. This is best understood in the media of the time. While stories from England and firearm advertisements appealed to more traditional equations of personal armament and the gentry, variations in American firearm use can be seen in Boston's press, hinting at the existence of a sub-culture within the larger context of Boston's gun culture. While the aristocrats of the time observed the carrying of pistols as a privilege of the elite, accounts of pistol use by the lower classes indicated the blurring social distinctions of the time.

Throughout this time, the access that one had to firearms was heavily dependent on the surrounding context of his life. As this context rapidly changed during the period of the Imperial Crisis and the start of the American Revolution, so too did many colonists' ability to arm themselves. In this way, the access one had to firearms, and the way in which he used his gun, provided a powerful indication of deeper social and political change.

The importance of this revelation extends far beyond the context of Revolutionary Boston. If the access that one has to personal defense can be a metric for social structures and societal change, then such methodology may provide a novel lens through which other historical events can be studied. The emergence of a national gun culture in the United States is a topic of intense debate in early twenty-first century scholarship. A deeper understanding of how larger social, political, and cultural events coincided with American relations between class and the right to bear arms adds a deeper context to contemporary concerns regarding firearm legislation. Just as larger societal factors helped shape, and were shaped by, the citizenry's access to firearms, contemporary shifts in gun culture likely correspond with similar changes in class relations and social structures.

Notes

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- ¹ General Court of Massachusetts, *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves 1775-1776* (Boston: University of Massachusetts), 596.
- ² *The Essex Gazette*, “London,” May 4, 1773.
- ³ For medieval Europeans, the use of physical force to solidify societal prestige generated a stratified social caste system, wherein the societal elites relegated the ownership and use weapons to a small and privileged warrior class. In this way, weapons were imbued with a societal power in addition to their physical power.
- ⁴ M.L. Brown, *Firearms in Colonial America: The Impact on History and Technology 1492-1792* (Washington D.C.: the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980), 126.
- ⁵ T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped the American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 36.
- ⁶ *The Massachusetts Gazette and The Boston Weekly Newsletter*, “London, Nov. 12,” February 25, 1773.
- ⁷ *The Massachusetts Gazette and The Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser*, “London, Feb. 15,” April 19, 1773.
- ⁸ *The Massachusetts Gazette and The Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser*, “London, Feb. 4,” April 19, 1773.
- ⁹ *The Boston News-Letter*, “London, March 9,” May 13, 1773.
- ¹⁰ *The Massachusetts Spy*, “Extract of a Letter from Gloucester, Dated July 19,” October 7, 1773.
- ¹¹ *The Boston Gazette*, “To the Publick,” October 18, 1773.
- ¹² *The Boston Evening Post*, “Philadelphia, July 21,” August 2, 1773.
- ¹³ *The Boston post Boy*, “Baltimore, August 20,” August 30, 1773.
- ¹⁴ *The Boston News-Letter*, “John Nazro,” June 23, 1774.
- ¹⁵ *The Boston News-Letter*, “John Herrington,” April 22, 1773.
- ¹⁶ *The Boston Post-Boy*, “John Whitten,” April 26, 1773.
- ¹⁷ *Massachusetts Spy*, “Friends and Brethren,” December 16, 1774.
- ¹⁸ Fred Anderson, *A People’s Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Year War* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 230. Though Anderson investigates militia membership during the Seven Years’ War, the demographics of militia membership during the American Revolution are comparable. It should be noted that the figures given in Anderson’s tables are not cited directly, but merely provide a general feel for the types of people who may have participated in the revolutionary militia in Boston.
- ¹⁹ *The Boston Post-Boy*, “A Letter from New York, Dated June 1,” September 20, 1773.
- ²⁰ Lee Kennett and James LaVerne Anderson, *The Gun in America: The Origins of a National Dilemma* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), 43.
- ²¹ Kennett and Anderson, *The Gun in America*, 40.
- ²² Kennett and Anderson, *The Gun in America*, 38.
- ²³ Brown, *Firearms in Colonial America*, 127.
- ²⁴ David Salav, “The Production of Gunpowder in Pennsylvania during the American Revolution,” in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*: vol. 99: 4 (1975), 422-423.
- ²⁵ *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves 1775-1776*, 450.
- ²⁶ General Court of Massachusetts, *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves 1771-1772* (Boston: University of Massachusetts), 168.
- ²⁷ David Salav, “The Production of Gunpowder,” 423.
- ²⁸ General Court of Massachusetts, *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts 1773-1774* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1981), 239.
- ²⁹ David Salav, “The Production of Gunpowder,” 423.
- ³⁰ Richard L. Bushman, *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 21.
- ³¹ Bushman, *King and People*, 219-226.
- ³² *Journals, 1775-1776*, 91.
- ³³ *Journals, 1775-1776*, 53.
- ³⁴ Kennett and Anderson, *The Gun in America*, 10-11.
- ³⁵ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776*, (New York City, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955), 109.
- ³⁶ Daniel H. Usner, Jr., *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 139, 165, 187.

³⁷ Kennett and Anderson, *The Gun in America*, 44.

³⁸ Michael A. Bellesiles, "Firearms Regulation: A Historical Review," in *Crime and Justice*: vol. 28 (2001), 144-146. Though Bellesiles' work has been called into question in the past as a result of his poor historical methods used in the writing of *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*, the information he provides on the racial and social limitations of firearm ownership in colonial British North America remains an example of solid scholarship.

³⁹ *Journals, 1775-1776*, 13.

⁴⁰ *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1775-1776*, 521.

⁴¹ *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves 1776-1777*, 678.

⁴² *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1776-1777*, 598.

⁴³ *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1776-1777*, 596.

⁴⁴ *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1776-1777*, 596.

⁴⁵ *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1776-1777*, 594.

⁴⁶ *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1776-1777*, 598.

⁴⁷ *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1776-1777*, 598.

⁴⁸ *Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1776-1777*, 598.

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