

COMMERCE AND CONFLICT:
THE KNOWLES RIOT OF 1747 AND
TRANSATLANTIC OPPOSITION TO IMPRESSMENT

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In 1742, William Shirley, governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, gave a foreboding speech to the colony's House of Representatives. In it, he called for a law that would prohibit impressment, the forced recruitment of merchant sailors into the Royal Navy. Shirley wanted the House to "pass an Act for effectually preventing this evil Practice" that would otherwise create a "great charge and Trouble to this government in providing Seamen for his Majesty's Ships of War."¹ While arguing against impressment on account of these difficulties, he also cited the human cost incurred by "officers...impressing Men indiscriminately to the Great Grievance of particular families," pointing to impressment's effects on Boston's sailors.² Shirley also asked for an "account of the progress made in the Works at *Castle William*," a fortification overlooking the entrance to Boston Harbor, in the hopes that its construction would be completed quickly.³ Little did he know, these issues would soon be linked together in an imminent crisis in the colony.

Five years later, in the fall of 1747, Commodore Charles Knowles of the Royal Navy made port in Boston as his squadron sailed from Louisbourg to his new command in the West Indies. Prior to landing in New England, sailors deserted the warships, forcing Knowles to gather supplies and recoup the loss of able-bodied sailors. On November 17, falling back on the Royal Navy's practice of impressing sailors to fill ships' crews, Knowles sent press gangs to comb merchant ships exiting Boston Harbor and press men off Boston's wharves. The gangs

were supposed to locate the deserters, or at least press non-local sailors, but they ultimately took men indiscriminately off the docks, without regard to occupation or origin.⁴ In response, a riot broke out in Boston that spiraled out of control as it raged for three days. Assembled on the waterfront, the rioters engaged in escalating displays of dissatisfaction. After Governor Shirley unsuccessfully tried to calm the crowd, he was forced to flee to the safety of Castle William, which, luckily, had been completed in the five years since his aforementioned speech. Shortly thereafter, tensions continued to mount. Matters were brought to the brink of extreme violence when Knowles began preparing to bombard the town.⁵ He only relented after receiving a written petition from Governor Shirley that asked him to desist and release the impressed men. After some of the men were released, the rioting subsided and the mob dispersed.⁶



Sir Charles Knowles (1704–1777), the British Royal Navy officer responsible for the outbreak of the eponymous Knowles Riot in November 1747

The relatively few sources that directly discuss the affair encompass a broad spectrum of social classes and political affiliations. For example, the mentality of the mob can be assessed through depositions from the libel case of *Knowles v. Douglass* (1748–49). While letters from officials such as Governor Shirley and Commodore Knowles provide the point of view of the political and naval elite who opposed the rioters, the historical account of then-Speaker Thomas Hutchinson reveals the perspective of a more sympathetic faction of the political elite.⁷ Newspaper accounts, both in Boston and England, provided a forum for voices across the political spectrum. The letters published in these accounts also give a unique outlook on the rioting. Some writers, such as William Douglass, published pamphlets that supported the opposition to impressment based solely on economic interests.⁸ Others, such as Samuel Adams, presented an emergent intellectual perspective that justified the riot as a defense of the sailors’ “natural Right[s]” and their “Liberties.”⁹ Through these sources, a cross-section of Bostonian opinion can be brought to light.

The Knowles Riot must be juxtaposed with the development of opposition to impressment across the British Atlantic, but thus far many historians have interpreted the riot in a variety of other contexts. Some, such as Jack Tager, understand it as an example of social conflict, characterizing it as part of a series of “acts of selective communal violence” perpetrated by “Boston’s plebeians,” thereby drawing focus to the regional context.¹⁰ Similarly, Russell Bourne’s description of the affair as a “community uprising” draws attention to the particularities of Boston’s society.¹¹ Marxist historians, such as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, prefer to cast the Knowles Riot in terms of the “motley crew’s resistance to slavery,” emphasizing the sailors’ unification against political and military authority.¹² Others synthesize these two schools of thought. In particular, John Lax and William Pencak try to combine them in their analysis. On the one hand, they are “especially convinced” by the Marxists’ focus on the “sailors’

agency,” while on the other, they differentiate Boston from other port cities and emphasize its local context.¹³ They also make their own contribution, claiming that the mob included “people of all classes,” implying more widespread participation than the proletarian analyses.¹⁴ This extant literature thus analyzes the Knowles Riot through a variety of differing perspectives.

The context of other riots in the British Atlantic, however, exposes the similarities and innovations of the Knowles Riot in a way that has been left largely unexplored. The long tradition of impressment in the Royal Navy has been accompanied by an equally storied tradition of opposition. Impressment riots in other ports across the Atlantic can be used to bring the defining features of the Knowles Riot into relief. Certainly, this transatlantic context clarifies the mob’s actions in Boston when they align with practices elsewhere, but it also exposes the divergences between the Knowles Riot and other opposition.



In this caricature by famed printmaker James Gilray, a press gang is depicted as taking a young man off the docks in London in 1779. Similar riots took place across the British Atlantic throughout the eighteenth century.

By understanding these divergences as a product of the Knowles Riot's local and temporal context, the nature of resistance in the pre-Revolutionary American colonies can be distinguished. The events of the Knowles Riot draw particular attention to the interactions between Boston's mob and its elite population. In one sense, the mob's objections parallel the grievances espoused in other impressment riots. The sailors' complaints mirror E.P. Thompson's description of the moral economy of British crowds, which felt they were "defending traditional rights or customs" during bread riots.¹⁵ Sailors across the British Atlantic would protest when they felt that the traditional balance of power had been disrupted and Boston's mob proved to be no exception. In another sense, the mob in Boston seems to have been composed of a much broader segment of society, drawing on members of the lower orders across the town. Similar nuances apply to Boston's divided elite, with some wealthy Bostonians supporting the government and a mercantile interest opposing impressment. This cleavage was fairly typical of impressment riots. In Boston, however, it seems that a unique opposition arose among an intellectual elite that justified the riots based on conceptions of natural rights and liberties. Thompson notes that "men of education and address" often "endorsed the theories of the crowd" in English bread riots.¹⁶ Though such views were occasionally adopted by wealthy Englishmen, the intellectual elite in Boston applied their arguments as justifications for a specific instance of maritime opposition. The transatlantic context of the Knowles Riot underscores similarities, such as the mob's grievances and an elite economic opposition to impressment, but also exposes important distinctions, such as the mob's diverse composition and an emergent elite philosophical opposition to impressment.

The details of the Knowles Riot deserve more thorough discussion to better contextualize its severity. As mentioned briefly above, the riot started after Commodore Knowles began pressing men on November 17, 1747. Depositions from the libel suit *Knowles v. Douglass* reveal that he sent press gangs to take men

from outbound ships.¹⁷ Though Knowles denied it, the same depositions also claim that his men came onto the wharves of Boston, pressing sailors and craftsmen into service. Both developments deviated from the Royal Navy's convention of pressing sailors from inbound ships.¹⁸ In response, rioters protested and demanded the release of the impressed men. Some protesters took Knowles's officers as hostages with the hopes of ransoming them in exchange. By November 19, the Massachusetts House of Representatives ordered that "all other officers... [should] be forthwith set at Liberty," indicating this practice's prevalence.¹⁹ Other tactics were also employed as protesters gathered around the Governor's House, provoking a violent confrontation between the mob and British officers.²⁰ Though Shirley spoke to calm the mob, he was unsuccessful and eventually fled to Castle William. The governor's flight was precipitated by Boston's militia ignoring his call to put down the rioters.²¹ Historically, it was not unusual for British militias to fail to put down riots. Thompson notes that British officers exhibited a "general reluctance to employ military force" against rioters.²² In the Bostonian context, however, the militiamen seem to have been especially active in the rioting.²³ Though Shirley insisted that he did not "retire... for Safety to [his] Person," it seems that the size of the mob forced him to seek refuge in the fortification.²⁴ Even in these first moments, the actions of the rioters escalated rapidly.

Over the ensuing days, the protesters engaged in several further demonstrations. At one point they took a barge, mistakenly considered the Royal Navy's property but actually owned by a Scottish merchant, and burned it in the middle of Boston Common.²⁵ Thomas Hutchinson's *History of the Province of Massachusetts-Bay* [*sic*] uses this incident to discuss the mob's organization. Though the mob initially intended to burn the barge in front of the Governor's House, it "diverted" the plan "from a consideration of the danger of setting the town on fire," demonstrating that it did not rage devoid of reason.²⁶ At the same time, however, the rioters were not afraid to engage in radical acts of

protest. As the mob swelled into a group of thousands of disgruntled Bostonians drawn from an array of diverse professions, its actions grew bolder.²⁷ For example, the mob congregated near the House of Representatives hoping to secure the release of the pressed men. Governor Shirley wrote that when the rioters “surrounded the Court-House,” they offered “outrageous Insults on the Authority of this Government.”²⁸ After their unsuccessful appeal, the members of the mob threw rocks at the recently vacated building, shattering its windows.²⁹ Matters finally came to a head as the riot neared its conclusion, when Knowles positioned ships to bombard the city.³⁰ Ultimately, Governor Shirley convinced the commodore to release some of the pressed men, at which point the rioting subsided. After Knowles dismissed “most, if not all, of the inhabitants who had been impressed,” the governor returned from Castle William.³¹ The imminent danger of escalating violence had been avoided through Governor Shirley’s intervention.

Following Shirley’s return, the town and government began making amends. As Hutchinson notes, an “uncommon appearance of the militia of the town of Boston” gathered to receive the governor.³² Newspapers reported that this was “the most numerous and best Appearance of the Militia under Arms, that has been known for divers Years past,” as the townspeople tried to show their obedience to Governor Shirley.³³ In the following days, both the House of Representatives and members of the Boston Town Meeting issued several resolves that condemned the rioting. The meeting’s resolution attempted to blame the riot on “foreign Seamen, Servants, Negroes, and other Persons of mean and vile Condition,” while asserting that “this Town [has] the utmost Abhorrence of all such illegal criminal Proceedings.”³⁴ Meanwhile, Shirley publicly offered “*One Hundred Pounds Old Tenor as a Reward*” for those who informed on the leaders of the mob while calling on the rioters to “surrender themselves up to Justice.”³⁵ With this reconciliation of the people and their government, the Knowles Riot came to a

peaceful resolution.

The other necessary contextual component is the temporal and spatial background of transatlantic opposition to impressment in ports across the British Empire. Impressment was one of the essential methods by which the Royal Navy manned its warships. As historian N.A.M. Rodger discusses, the Royal Navy relied on a “symbiosis of trade and sea,” in which merchant mariners were taken from merchant ships and ports to fill warships’ crews with experienced sailors.³⁶ In return, the Royal Navy protected merchant ships on the high seas. Since sailors often preferred the higher wages paid for service aboard merchantmen, the military relied on compulsory service to crew its ships.³⁷ This necessity was the impetus for Knowles’s press in 1747. Even contemporary opponents of impressment recognized the need for able-bodied sailors. Samuel Adams, one of impressment’s staunchest colonial opponents, conceded that it would pose a significant “difficulty...to man the Navy” without the “heavy... Grievance” of impressment, indicating the common knowledge that men could only be enticed to sail by force.³⁸ Throughout the Atlantic, it was understood that the only way for the Royal Navy to crew the warships that would protect merchantmen was, ironically, by stripping the merchant marine of its sailors through impressment.

Though necessary, the practice was constrained by several customs that limited its scope and usage. By the mid-eighteenth century, impressment was becoming increasingly formally regulated through a series of institutional changes in the Royal Navy. In 1745, Parliament appointed regulating captains, a forerunner of the Seven Years’ War’s formalized Impress Service, to uphold certain standards.³⁹ Among these standards, the press gangs were supposed to release men who were not sailors or who held protections, a type of exemption.⁴⁰ When these norms were violated in Boston in 1747, it would have made sailors’ grievances even more acute and their reactions even more severe. To borrow from Thompson, it was often the “outrage to

these moral assumptions” that sparked the sailors’ direct action.⁴¹ Impressment was also limited by a tradition that gangs required warrants. Rodger is quick to point out that there was “no legal necessity” for press gangs to receive these warrants from local magistrates or officials.⁴² As Nicholas Rogers suggests, however, warrants became a practical necessity for press gangs in the British Empire, as they dissuaded imposters and restrained the gangs with a form of due process.⁴³ In Boston, a controversy arose over the legitimacy of the press gang’s warrant. According to Governor Shirley, a member of the mob claimed that his “unjustifiable Impress Warrant” caused the rioting.⁴⁴ Certainly, Shirley did not improve matters when he responded that he had never issued a warrant for the press gangs.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the conversation demonstrates the importance of warrants in the practice of impressment. The traditional, legalistic restraints provided a framework for restricting impressment in the mid-eighteenth century British Empire.

A secondary set of limitations was centered on the physical space in which impressment occurred. This type of restraint was related to the places and categories of ships subject to impressment, such as the distinction between impressment on the waterfront and aboard ships at sea. This distinction had ramifications for the organization of opposition to the gangs. For example, in Liverpool in 1759, the crew of the *Golden Lion* opposed a press gang from HMS *Vengeance* that tried to board the ship.⁴⁶ The fighting that broke out was limited to the two crews, with the *Golden Lion*’s men using harpoons to stave off the warship’s gang.⁴⁷ Conversely, a riot in Bristol that year featured “three hundred seamen” who “gathered in a riotous manner” in response to a press gang’s attempts to take sailors from the wharves.⁴⁸ In Boston, the dynamics of opposition would be influenced by Knowles’s gang taking men from ships in the harbor *and* off the docks.

Similarly, there was a distinction between the categories of ships that were subject to impressment. Merchant sailors and

the Royal Navy tacitly understood that only inbound ships would be pressed.⁴⁹ As Denver Brunsman understands it, this implicit rule was intended to prevent the practice of impressment from undermining the strength of the empire. By only pressing inbound ships, the Royal Navy prevented itself from crippling merchantmen before they left port.⁵⁰ This practice provided the ancillary benefit that all pressed sailors would have gained experience aboard the merchantmen. Linda Colley even suggests that this experience was “indispensable for the operation of [British] naval power.”⁵¹ However, if the Royal Navy took men from outbound ships, Brunsman notes that it would be “more likely . . . to trigger violence.”⁵² Hutchinson’s complaint that Knowles’s men took sailors off ships that were “outward bound as well as others” can be understood within this context.⁵³ These further constraints on impressment were part of the shared expectations of limitations on the press gangs’ practices.

In general, various forms of opposition to impressment arose when the Royal Navy ignored the traditional limitations. Surprisingly, as Rodger discusses, sailors generally accepted the necessity of the practice and only resisted under special circumstances when its customs were violated.⁵⁴ While some opponents attempted to use the law, others resorted to political means or even physical violence. Legal attempts to prohibit impressment utilized legislation and lawsuits to defend sailors. For example, in *Broadfoot’s Case* (1743), a sailor charged with murder for shooting a member of a press gang was supported by the public as a protector of British liberties.⁵⁵ Through a circumstantial technicality, the jury was directed to bring in a verdict of manslaughter, while Sir Michael Foster, the Recorder of Bristol, wrote an opinion that supported the general legality of impressment.⁵⁶ Still, legal attempts to limit impressment achieved a victory in the North American colonies through the Sixth of Anne Act of 1708. The law stipulated that, barring deserters, no one in the American colonies could be pressed by British officers.⁵⁷ Though this law was intended to promote commerce during Queen Anne’s War,

its status became ambiguous at the conclusion of the conflict in 1713. While it was unclear if the law was still valid, sailors in North American ports endorsed a continuation of the ban, but British officials dismissed it as a wartime measure.⁵⁸ In the midst of this legal ambiguity, Parliament passed another law in 1746 that prohibited impressment in the West Indies, which was theoretically already protected by the Sixth of Anne.⁵⁹ The passage of the new law implied that the Sixth of Anne's universal protections were no longer binding in the American colonies. The uncertainty over impressment's legality in North America would become a flashpoint for the Knowles Riot, with contemporaries claiming that the West Indies' exemption placed an undue burden on New England.⁶⁰ These legal attempts constituted one strain of broader transatlantic resistance.

Alternative types of resistance, such as political bargaining and physical violence, also emerged as practical forms of opposition to impressment. One such political response involved the direct mediation of municipal governments. As Rodger notes, both political and economic interests drove the desire to mitigate the effects of impressment.⁶¹ In the British Isles, several cities eventually coordinated with the Royal Navy to standardize and limit its impressment efforts. Bristol's strong municipal government reached an agreement with the navy around 1746 that would provide a fixed number of sailors in exchange for an exemption from impressment ashore.⁶² On the other hand, a comparatively weak local government in Liverpool could not provide the same mediation, leading to more frequent clashes between the navy and the mob.⁶³ Though other historical and demographic factors affected the frequency of riots, this discrepancy shows the potential role of civil government in mediating the tensions caused by impressment. Such clashes between the navy and the mob provide a background to better understand the Knowles Riot. In fact, as Nicholas Rogers documents, there were "at least 55 affrays against the press gangs" over the duration of King George's War.⁶⁴ The character of the unrest can

be generalized through selected examples. Though sympathetic civilians often assisted the rioters, especially when non-sailors were pressed, the sailors largely led resistance efforts. Usually, when press gangs attempted to press men directly from merchant ships, only the sailors aboard the ship opposed them and the affair seldom spread more widely. For example, when a gang from HMS *Winchelsea* attempted to press the crew of the *Tarleton* near Liverpool in 1744, the sailors directly resisted by firing on the warship before ultimately disappearing into the town.⁶⁵ On the other hand, when press gangs went ashore, resistance usually spread across the maritime community. As expected, these riots were substantially larger. In February 1762, for example, hundreds of sailors, carpenters, and shipwrights gathered in Liverpool to protest the impressment of twenty-five sailors.⁶⁶ The previously mentioned 1759 riot in Bristol swelled to nearly three hundred sailors who united against the press gang.⁶⁷ Though each impressment riot had unique characteristics, these examples typify patterns of opposition in the British Empire.

The grievances of the mob in Boston can be related to these examples of resistance to impressment. In fact, many of the arguments made by members of the mob, or by elite writers on their behalf, echo those made in prior instances of opposition. One particular type of grievance found in the historical record is the sailors' pragmatic objections. A frequent refrain of the sailors is the incredible personal suffering imposed by the press. The Knowles Riot even galvanized one writer to publicize the "prodigious hardships we [sailors] daily suffer" as a result of impressment.⁶⁸ The deposition of Josiah Gains from *Knowles v. Douglass* paints a startling picture of the harshness with which men were pressed from their merchant ships. As Gains recounted, he was "Surprized with four Barges & about 80 men well armed" from the Royal Navy who suddenly began boarding his ship.⁶⁹ Ultimately, the press gang informed Gains that they would "take every Man Except the Captain out of the Ship," stripping the ship of its crew.⁷⁰ Historians have corroborated similar accounts

in which “whole crews...were taken, and outward-bound vessels were raided for men.”⁷¹ Several letters published in Boston’s newspapers echoed the concerns of the pressed sailors. In a letter printed by the *Independent Advertiser*, the author noted that impressed men were often “Heads of Families” and called upon his audience to recognize the “Hardships which must ensue from” the “intolerable” impressment and “the Distresses which must arise” from such a “Prodigious Depopulation,” both for the community and individuals.⁷² Similarly, the author noted that impressment creates a “Destruction of the Youth” not unlike the “Destruction of the Spring,” emphasizing the negative consequences of depriving Boston of its young male population.⁷³ The mob’s pragmatic grievances underscore the profound effects of impressment and align with developments in the Atlantic maritime world.

In addition to these practical arguments, the members of the mob also produced several quasi-legal arguments that, though specific to the Bostonian context, align with arguments used elsewhere in the British Atlantic. Some of these complaints related to the process of Knowles’s impressment. While the very initial stages remain unclear, some sources report that the mob was unhappy with a ruse played by Knowles. In England, the *Whitehall Evening Post* reported that the “Insurrection at Boston [was] occasioned” when Knowles tricked Boston’s sailors by “ordering a Schooner to be advertised to go [as] a Privateer on the Spanish Main, for which they beat up for Volunteers” and then “immediately impressed all the Men from the Merchant Ships in the Harbour that were ready to go under his Convoy,” using the ruse to fool Boston’s sailors.⁷⁴ Supposedly “exasperated... to such a Degree” by this deception, the people began to riot.⁷⁵ Though this report omits several details when recounting the rioting, it exemplifies some of the legalistic arguments that attempted to invalidate impressment.⁷⁶

More broadly, Bostonian sailors produced quasi-legal arguments that Knowles’s press had violated the traditions

of impressment.⁷⁷ As Joseph Ballard, a sailor in Commodore Knowles's squadron, acknowledged in his deposition, the mob was allegedly "Occasioned by the Men of War's Boats coming up to Town."⁷⁸ This understanding implies that the mob was specifically agitated by Knowles's press on the wharves. As seen in other cases in the British Empire, the method of impressment, land-based or ship-based, played a significant role in its acceptability in different ports. Similarly, another argument was made regarding the types of ships that were accosted by Knowles's press gangs. As Josiah Gains mentioned in his deposition, he told the gang that his vessel was "Outward bound" but they only "Damned him & order'd him to go Immediately into their boat."⁷⁹ Thomas Hutchinson also made note of the fact that the gangs took men off ships that were "outward bound as well as others."⁸⁰ This mention implies that, at the very least, the departure from tradition was noteworthy. The press gangs' disregard for this custom drew the ire of the mob and Boston's general population, especially once it was noticed by the sailors who understood impressment's implicit code of conduct. A related



Thomas Hutchinson (1711–1780) served as speaker of the General Court from 1746 to 1749. His *History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay* is a crucial source for understanding the Knowles Riot.

allegation arose that an irregular assortment of people was taken. Hutchinson notes that the press gangs also took “some ship carpenters’ apprentices and laboring land men.”⁸¹ In one case, “two apprentices” who were accosted were able to avoid impressment only after claiming that “they were about their Master’s business.”⁸² Jonathan Tarbox noted that he avoided impressment by claiming that he was only a caulker, although others were not as fortunate.⁸³ Additionally, though specific to the North American context, sailors tried to make the case that impressment in Boston was illegal or, at least, unfair. Due to the Sixth of Anne Act, there was a lingering controversy about impressment’s legality in the North American colonies, with British jurists claiming that the law had expired and sailors concluding that its provisions against impressment were still binding.⁸⁴ Several letters published in the local newspapers picked up similar arguments. In one case, an anonymous author channeled the sailors’ concerns by writing that, since Boston was “singled out from the rest of the King’s Provinces” for these “Scenes of Depredation,” Knowles’s press gang was committing an “Injustice.”⁸⁵ Together, these types of complaints and arguments, both practical and legal in nature, represent the ways in which the Boston mob recapitulated the anti-impressment arguments of sailors across the British Empire.

However, the transatlantic comparison also reveals how Boston’s mob featured wider social participation that transcended maritime relationships and included members from across Bostonian society. At the end of the riot, both the House of Representatives and members of the Boston Town Meeting tried to distance the population of Boston from the tumult. Even so, as Brunsman argues, by offering such strong censure *following* the riot, these bodies ironically imply how emphatically Bostonians had united against impressment *during* the riot.⁸⁶ Similarly, Lax and Pencak suggest that the town was “appearing to suppress a crowd it had in fact supported” by uniting in post-riot condemnation to ensure that “the town avoided Knowles’s guns.”⁸⁷

On November 19, the House of Representatives passed a resolve that “there has been... a tumultuous riotous Assembling of Armed Seamen, Servants, Negroes and others in the Town of Boston,” trying to shift blame from the citizens who participated in the rioting to social outsiders and non-Bostonians.⁸⁸ The Boston Town Meeting made a similar proclamation on December 17, calling the riot a product of “*foreign* Seamen,” further removing the maritime population from the city as a whole, while also blaming “Servants, Negroes, and other Persons of mean and vile Condition.”⁸⁹ In the same resolve, members of the Boston Town Meeting tried to prove their obedience by proclaiming their “utmost Abhorrence of all such illegal criminal Proceedings.”⁹⁰ As a supposed “Proof” of the alleged innocence of the town and that the “Mind of the Inhabitants of the Town” was against such “Tumult and Disorders,” many newspapers proclaimed that “the most numerous and best Appearance of the Militia” arose at the end of the riot.⁹¹ Following the riot, Bostonian political organizations engaged in a deliberate attempt to distance the citizenry from the proceedings.

These demonstrations were likely intended to prevent potential retaliatory attacks on the city. After all, Governor Shirley had threatened an “infamous Reproach upon the Duty and Loyalty of the Town” if they failed to prove their loyalty.⁹² This threat of retribution clearly had a significant effect, to the extent that even individuals tried to prevent harm from befalling the city on account of the unrest. For example, Gershom Flagg, a sailor in Knowles’s squadron, recalled telling the commodore that he was “sorrey that the Innocent should suffer with the guilty” and insisted that “no men of Distinction or of any free Hold ware [*sic*] among the mob or Riot.”⁹³ Although Flagg claimed to be from the city’s North End, he clearly could have had no idea about who was actually supporting the mob because of his service aboard the warships in the harbor. Nonetheless, Flagg had a vested interest in convincing the commodore that the mob was composed mainly of foreigners, sailors, and slaves, as did the

other individuals and political bodies that were trying to protect the city. By assigning blame to otherwise marginalized groups in Bostonian society, many people and political institutions associated with the riots tried to spare Boston from retribution.

In fact, a closer examination of the rioting reveals that the mob in the Knowles Riot was composed of a much broader cross section of society than other impressment riots of the period. While sailors may have initiated the unrest, it ultimately included craftsmen and other Bostonians. The account given by Thomas Hutchinson documents this broad support for the rioting. For example, Hutchinson wrote that in the early phases of unrest “several thousand people assembled in King Street” in protest.⁹⁴ Though this estimate is not exact, any gathering of that magnitude would be astounding since Boston had only approximately 16,382 residents in 1742.⁹⁵ Hutchinson even explicitly commented on the character of the forming mob. He recorded that “men of all orders resented [the press],” indicating how deeply the anti-impressment sentiment permeated Bostonian society.⁹⁶ The mob’s broad composition is further implied by its choice of weapons. The “sticks, clubs, [and] pitchmops” used during the unrest were not particularly maritime weapons, such as cutlasses, pistols, or miscellaneous nautical equipment including marlinspikes.⁹⁷ Governor Shirley’s letters reveal that he was aware that the uproar was not limited to the city’s sailors. Shirley wrote publicly that there was “Reason to apprehend that the Insurrection was...encourag’d by some ill-minded inhabitants, and persons of influence in the town,” signifying that he also believed that townspeople had joined in the rioting.⁹⁸ Though there were some supportive “Officers and Gentlemen of the Town,” his retreat to Castle William implies that the affair was more serious and widespread than a mere maritime squabble.⁹⁹ Other notable figures echoed this sentiment, including Samuel Adams, who wrote that “the People” were “running together for their mutual Defence.”¹⁰⁰ Even contemporary writers acknowledged the significant participation of Boston’s non-sailor population.

An indicator of the widespread nature of the upheaval was the response of Boston's militia, or rather, the lack thereof. Shirley, when he fled to Castle William, noted that he could not raise "a proper force for Suppressing this Insurrection" and that he could not even defend the Governor's House.¹⁰¹ Even more directly, Shirley wrote that "the soldiers of the militia...[have] refus'd and neglected to obey my Orders...to appear in Arms," indicating that the city militia, composed of Bostonians across professions and social classes, could not be raised.¹⁰² This inability to raise the militia is telling. Certainly, it is possible that the militiamen refused to respond amid the chaos of the ongoing protests for a number of practical reasons, including fear of looming conflict with fellow Bostonians.¹⁰³ Given the descriptions of the size and composition of the mob, however, it is likely that the militia did not form because its members were, to some degree, participants in the riot. The militia, intrinsically local in character, likely would have had few sailors among its ranks. Therefore, its refusal to muster on Governor Shirley's orders suggests the degree to which the non-sailor population joined the rioters. On November 19, the colony's executive council condemned the ongoing "dangerous Insurrection of Seamen and others" in Boston.¹⁰⁴ This mention of the presence of "others" suggests that non-sailor participation was significant enough to warrant its inclusion in a description of the unrest. Distinguishing itself from analogous contemporary maritime protests, the Knowles Riot seemed to contain far more of these "other" participants among the mob's ranks.

In a more abstract sense, another key facet of the Knowles Riot involved the role and nature of elite support for the protests. In some ways, the role of social and political elites is related to trends in other episodes of resistance to impressment. For example, the opinions of Boston's elite were not monolithic. According to Thomas Hutchinson, "a number of gentlemen" contacted Governor Shirley and assured him that "they would stand by him" against the protesters.¹⁰⁵ Although this group did

not constitute enough men for Shirley to put down the riot, or even enough for him to remain in the city, it shows that some members of the upper classes opposed the rioters. Similarly, Shirley himself noted that some “Officers and Gentlemen” continued to share in a sense of “Duty and Attachment to the King’s Government.”¹⁰⁶ Evidently, he knew that he retained the support of some wealthy Bostonians. These gentlemen who supported Shirley were likely concerned about economic consequences, such as the potential property damage caused by the unrest. As in other riots, the protesters were not completely supported by all members of the upper classes.

Still, the arguments made by the mercantile elite in defense of the rioters echoed the economic arguments of elites in other ports. Boston’s merchants, as in seaports across the British Empire, viewed impressment as a depredation on shipping that left vessels without essential manpower. Such losses manifested themselves in various ways. In one case, as Josiah Gains mentioned in his deposition, a ship was left adrift in Boston Harbor without its crew after being accosted by a press gang from Knowles’s squadron. The abandoned ship then encountered “an Exceeding hard Gale of Wind” that “drove her Ashoar,” causing “great damage” to the ship and her cargo.¹⁰⁷ The concern about impressment’s immediate negative consequences on property was a primary motivator of the merchant elite’s opposition. Those who stood to lose monetarily often made appeals on behalf of their property. John Cathcart, master of a ship in Boston Harbor, wrote directly to Governor Shirley in the hopes of obtaining some sort of “account of the measures for the relief of his distressed ship,” trying to receive redress for the havoc wreaked by impressment.¹⁰⁸ In the long-term, Boston’s merchants feared even more extreme damages. As a letter published in the *Independent Advertiser* noted, the entire town would eventually suffer from “the great Injury...to the Plantations by being drained of their people,” indicating the severity of the manpower shortage caused by the frequent impressment

of working-age men.¹⁰⁹ These economic concerns explain the rationale behind the mercantile elite's support for the rioters.

The most prominent display of the sentiments of Boston's economic elite towards the rioters and the mercantile support for the mob's protests is found in the work of William Douglass. Douglass was a distinguished physician with varied interests, including law, medicine, botany, and astronomy, but his vehement opposition to impressment was published in his *Summary, Historical and Political, of the First Planting, Progressive Improvements, and Present State of the British Settlements in North-America*.¹¹⁰ Shortly after the Knowles Riot, sections of Douglass's work were published serially in Boston's newspapers. He used the typical mercantile arguments to respond to Knowles's actions. Douglass's criticism of Knowles's conduct and character was so severe that, as mentioned above, Knowles initiated the libel suit of *Knowles v. Douglass*.¹¹¹ Douglass personally critiqued Knowles in his rebuke, but he primarily attacked impressment's harmful economic effects. Brunsmann suggests that the critique was based on disdain for the rioting *caused* by impressment but, in reality, the argument was largely economic.¹¹² Douglass noted that impressment "hinders" both the "trade and navigation" of the places from which sailors are taken.¹¹³ In this analysis, opposition to impressment derives from a practical economic claim. Elsewhere, Douglass explained the longstanding "Dispute between the Admiralty and the Trade" as a rift between the interests of the merchants and their protectors.¹¹⁴ While the Royal Navy grumbled that merchants lured sailors into desertion, merchants complained about the hardships imposed by impressment.¹¹⁵ Douglass ultimately supported the merchants, arguing that impressment was directly linked to the "distressing of trade" in Boston.¹¹⁶ Through his work on the development of the British colonies in North America, William Douglass offered the typical mercantile elite argument against impressment by placing the town's economic interest against the military's need for manpower.

In tandem with the anti-impressment economic response of Boston's mercantile elite, the Knowles Riot also uniquely fostered an intellectual elite opposition. Unlike in other impressment riots, the Knowles Riot provoked the emergence of a coherent ideological argument among intellectuals against impressment predicated on the sailors' liberties and natural rights. The foundations of these ideological arguments were not entirely novel. As Rodger writes, plans for compulsory service in the military were often "rejected as incompatible with English liberties."¹¹⁷ Similarly, Massachusetts's House of Representatives had already written as early as 1720 that impressment was a violation of the "common Liberty of the Subject."¹¹⁸ It was only a small, logical step to extend this opposition to schemes that took sailors off the waterfront and merchant ships and forced them to serve in the Royal Navy. The specific innovation in Boston in 1747 was the rapid and widespread application of these ideas as a reaction to a specific instance of impressment. A letter published on December 28 justified the rioting by saying that, though people must submit to political authorities that "govern...for the good of the Society," they also have an obligation to "oppose them, if they design their Ruin or Destruction."¹¹⁹ In the same letter, the author made a claim to the "Liberties of *Englishmen*" that would be echoed several decades later in the American Revolution.¹²⁰ By staking this claim to liberties, the author took a frequent argument of English mobs and tied it to American colonial unrest. A later anonymous pamphlet, entitled *Plain Truth*, also supported a "glorious" defense of "our...most precious *Liberty* and *Property*," comparing the situation to the Glorious Revolution.¹²¹ By adapting preexisting notions of liberty and natural rights to the context of Boston's unrest, these writers tried to justify the mob's actions.

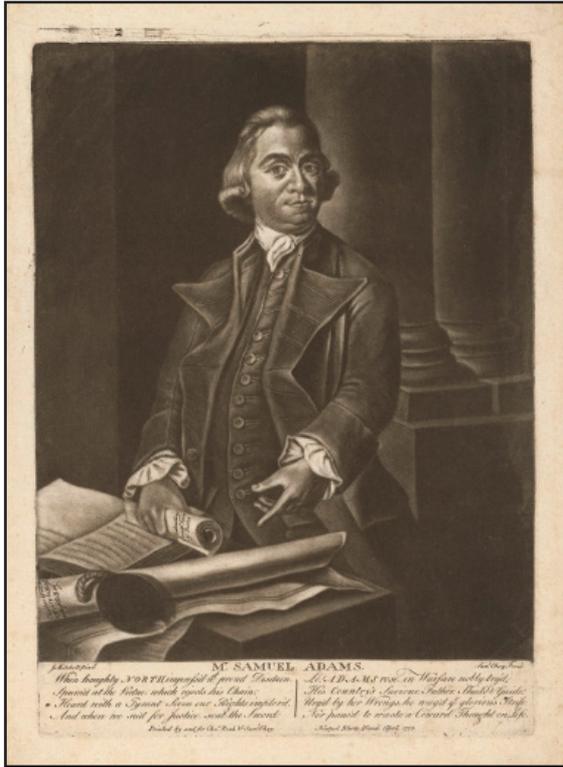
A final iteration of this ideological argument in contemporary newspapers can be found in the *Independent Advertiser*, which was founded by Samuel Adams in the aftermath of the Knowles Riot. In its inaugural issue on January 4, 1748, the paper

established a purpose of “defend[ing] the Rights and Liberties of Mankind...to improve the Trade, the Manufactures, and Husbandry of the Country.”¹²² In so doing, the newspaper implicitly joined the traditional economic arguments against impressment, embodied as issues of trade, manufactures, and husbandry, with the language of rights and liberties. In pursuing this mission, the *Independent Advertiser* continued to advocate the mob’s right to protest. Later on, the paper published a letter that defended the mob for exercising “the *natural right* which every man has...to repel those Mischiefs [of the press gangs]” by participating in the tumult.¹²³ It argued that, in the absence of a “sufficient Remedy,” the rioters “have a natural Right to defend themselves,” as in the case of Knowles’s actions.¹²⁴ The same letter began with an appropriate quote from Cicero’s *Pro Milone*, the speech given in defense of Titus Annius Milo in 52 BCE. The section quoted, in translation, dictates that people should be allowed to “repel all violence...from their persons, from their liberties, and from their lives,” in which case, “you cannot decide this action to have been wrong.”¹²⁵ This author deliberately drew upon the storied history of the Roman Republic to justify the mob’s actions. In the unique context of Boston’s Knowles Riot, these ideological arguments applied the preexisting language of the rights and liberties of sailors in order to justify the mob’s actions.

This argument in favor of the liberties and rights of the sailors found a surprisingly sympathetic response from Massachusetts Bay’s political bodies. On two occasions, these institutions acknowledged the rights-based grievances of the victims of Knowles’s press. Following the riot, as discussed above, members of the Town Meeting tried to shift the blame for the unrest towards marginalized members of the society, such as slaves and foreign sailors. They published their proceedings in the hopes of appealing to Governor Shirley. By and large, these proceedings served this purpose. However, they also noted that their response was decided “notwithstanding...that the Rights and Privileges of the Town had been invaded by the unwarrantable

Impress that had been made of several of their Inhabitants,” thereby adopting the language of the mob’s intellectual supporters.¹²⁶ Though this acknowledgment did not lend direct support to the rioters in the aftermath of the tumult, it demonstrates the argument’s influence. Similarly, the House of Representatives partially recognized that the government had violated individuals’ rights. On November 19, the House resolved that it would exert itself in “all Ways and Means Possible, in redressing such grievances as his Majesty’s subjects are and have been under,” thereby acknowledging the legitimacy of the citizenry’s complaints.¹²⁷ In these instances, the government seems to have partially accepted the claim that impressment impinged on Bostonians’ liberties.

Much like with the economic arguments, the rights-based intellectual arguments are best embodied by the work of a young Boston lawyer, in this case, Samuel Adams. Before becoming a leading figure of Boston’s mob and founding groups such as the Loyal Nine and the Sons of Liberty, Adams was a twenty-five-year-old lawyer who had just completed a dissertation on natural rights at Harvard in the years leading up to the Knowles Riot.¹²⁸ In 1748, Adams started a newspaper called the *Independent Advertiser*. As briefly mentioned, the paper argued against impressment by defending the rights and liberties of the sailors and citizens of Boston. In a separate pamphlet, Adams articulated the language and philosophy that animated his opposition. Under the pseudonym of *Amicus Patriae*, “A Friend of Our Country,” Adams raged against the press gang’s conduct as an “Insult upon our Liberties.”¹²⁹ Specifically, though he acknowledged that the “impressing of Seamen...has been long in Practice,” he rejected the notion that it had the “Force of Law.”¹³⁰ Adams also synthesized some of the more conventional arguments against impressment with his novel approach. He incorporated many of the concerns of the merchant elite, decrying the damaging effects on trade and commerce. He also adopted many of the mob’s complaints, citing the impact of taking men from “their Families and Friends.”¹³¹ As a consequence of including these



While publishing the *Independent Advertiser* and writing under the pseudonym *Amicus Patriae*, Samuel Adams (1722–1803) articulated a natural rights-based opposition to impressment in the aftermath of the Knowles Riot.

types of arguments, his own natural rights-based critique of impressment is extended as a rather subtle addition to his argument. Nonetheless, Adams distinguished his own strain of oppositional critique by adopting the language of natural rights and characterizing Knowles’s actions as a “lawless Attack upon our Liberty.”¹³² In this understanding, though he condemned some of the rioting, the mob could be justified as a body acting in defense of its natural rights. Adams’s argument, typical of works that emphasized rights and liberties, represents the core of an

emergent intellectual criticism of impressment offered by non-merchant Bostonians.

Interestingly, these two elite perspectives, though united in their conclusions, often disagreed, with some of these conflicts spilling onto the pages of Boston's newspapers. Though these emergent schools of thought may have agreed in principle in their opposition to impressment, their motives varied. On December 21, 1747, William Douglass published an excerpt of his work in the *Boston Evening Post*. In it, he wrote that "the least Appearance of a *Mob* (so called from *Mobile Vulgus*) ought to be suppressed, even where their Intention in any particular Affair is of itself very good; because they become Nurseries for dangerous Tumults."¹³³ In short, his statement epitomized a merchant's general sentiments towards the rioters. Though the mob was agitating for the end of impressment, which benefited the merchants, it is not surprising that these wealthy businessmen were uncomfortable with civil disturbances perpetrated by the lower orders. In response, an argument published in the *Independent Advertiser* on February 8, 1748, roundly condemned Douglass. There, the author began by noting that Douglass had "justly observed in another place the great Injury which must accrue to the Plantations by being drained of their people," thereby following in Adams's example by acknowledging the mercantile opposition to impressment.¹³⁴ However, he went on to denounce Douglass's characterization of the mob and his call for greater punishment of rioters, arguing that this "Suggestion" would be "so unnecessary, so cruel and unjust" that it would become a "Scandal upon the Character of the Country."¹³⁵ Clearly, those with economic objections and those with philosophical qualms had similar goals, but the two groups diverged on their opinions of the rioting itself.

While this conflict poses an interesting topic for further study, its importance for this analysis is to demonstrate that even those in Boston's higher society who detested impressment did not necessarily agree about the implications of their opposition.

As in impressment riots elsewhere, the arguments made by merchants mainly supported the status quo by defending their economic interests while condemning the social unrest caused by the protesters. However, the application of rights-based ideological arguments by intellectuals in opposition to a specific episode of impressment represented a unique feature of Boston's Knowles Riot. In fact, this conflict heightens the distinction between the two competing elite arguments against impressment. By means of this separation, the novelty of Adams's philosophical argument becomes an even more apparent departure from prior perspectives. Though the arguments employed by these groups often overlapped, their fundamental disagreement that has been preserved on the pages of Boston's newspapers exposed the clash between the traditional mercantile arguments and the emergent rights-based philosophical response of Bostonians such as Samuel Adams.

Broadly speaking, several continuities demonstrate how the Knowles Riot was influenced by prior unrest. The grievances expressed by the mob were focused largely on the human impact of being pressed into service, and the mercantile elite support of their opposition, on the basis of its effects on business, find clear parallels across riots in British ports such as Liverpool and Bristol. The Boston mob, however, must be distinguished for the widespread severity and broad implications of the Knowles Riot. This understanding should not minimize the support received by sailors in other port cities. Rather, it emphasizes the mass participation achieved in Boston that was made possible by the linkages between Bostonian life and the maritime professions. Though these linkages were not necessarily weaker in other maritime communities, these connections were apparently leveraged to garner broader support for sailors' protests in Boston. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for the Knowles Riot to escalate into a protest of "several thousand people," as Thomas Hutchinson wrote, or, at the very least, the Boston militia might have mustered under Governor Shirley's orders.¹³⁶ Similarly, the

emergent intellectual opinion in response to the press in 1747 presents a unique approach towards opposition. As noted before, the association between natural rights and impressment was not entirely novel. Through the writings of Adams and others, however, this language was operationalized in defense of a specific riot, providing intellectual ammunition to oppose impressment in practical terms. These writings complicate traditional assumptions about pre-Revolutionary mob actions in the American colonies. In particular, it challenges Bernard Bailyn's claim that riots in the American colonies before 1765 were "ideologically inert."¹³⁷ While the Knowles Riot certainly borrowed from other impressment riots, it also presented a unique case of widespread communal upheaval tied to a philosophical claim of natural rights and liberties.

The Knowles Riot was neither the first nor the last impressment riot in the British Empire. There is immense value in acknowledging and understanding the Knowles Riot in this context. The sailors and their fellow Bostonians who engaged in this form of mass protest would have been aware of prior unrest in the city, such as the *Wager* Incident of 1745, in which two merchant sailors were murdered by press gangs.¹³⁸ Similarly, this instance of crowd action would inform and influence developments across the Atlantic. For example, when whalers in Liverpool in 1759 took hostages from a press gang, they drew on a vernacular of opposition that was utilized in the Knowles Riot.¹³⁹ At the same time, comparison with the transatlantic history of impressment riots shows that the Knowles Riot was, in many ways, unique. To some degree, historians such as Russell Bourne are correct in analyzing the riot in the context of Boston's communal history.¹⁴⁰ The communal participation in Boston's riot paints a portrait of a deeply interconnected community with its nexus at the waterfront. A deeper understanding of the actions of sailors and the interconnection of ideas across the Atlantic maritime environment reveals how the Knowles Riot was woven into a web of broader opposition to impressment in the British

Empire. Though it is tempting to understand the Knowles Riot as the opening salvo in a barrage of Bostonian unrest that was followed by episodes of resistance in Boston Common and Boston Harbor, it is better understood as a startling broadside in a conflict that stretched across the North American colonies, the Caribbean, and the British Isles throughout the eighteenth century.

Commerce and Conflict

NOTES

¹ William Shirley, “The Speech of His Excellency...to both Houses of the General Assembly,” in *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, November 25, 1742.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* (emphasis original).

⁴ This practice was actually fairly unusual for press gangs, which generally limited their pressing to a town’s maritime population. Since landsmen were less competent sailors and the removal of a town’s mobile, detached sailor population would spark less controversy than the removal of central members of town life, this limitation made sense. For an overview of the usual practices of press gangs, see Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 1–15.

⁵ See the deposition of Nathaniel Parkman in John Noble, “The Libel Suit of Knowles v. Douglass” in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1900), 3:233.

⁶ The most comprehensive summary of these events is found in John Lax and William Pencak, “The Knowles Riot and the Crisis of the 1740s in Massachusetts,” in *Contested Commonwealths: Essays in American History* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2011).

⁷ For the letters of Governor William Shirley, the best compilation for this era can be found in the first volume of *Correspondence of William Shirley: Governor of Massachusetts and Military Commander in America, 1731-1760*, ed. Charles Henry Lincoln (New York: MacMillan, 1912). Hutchinson’s history was published as *The History of the Province of Massachusetts-Bay, from the Charter of King William and Queen Mary, in 1691, until the Year 1750. By Mr. Hutchinson, Lieutenant-governor of the Province* (Boston: Printed by Thomas & John Fleet, Cornhill, 1767).

⁸ For more on this economic argument against impressment, see William Douglass, *A Summary, Historical and Political, of the first Planting, progressive Improvements, and present State of the British Settlements in North-America* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1749).

⁹ Samuel Adams (*Amicus Patriae*), “An address to the inhabitants of the province of the Massachusetts-Bay in New England: more especially, to the inhabitants of Boston; Occasioned by the Late Illegal and Unwarrantable Attack upon Their Liberties, and the Unhappy Confusion and Disorders Consequent Thereon. By a Lover of His Country” (Pamphlet), (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1747), 3–4.

¹⁰ Jack Tager, *Boston Riots* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 75.

¹¹ Russell Bourne, *Cradle of Violence: How Boston’s Waterfront Mobs Ignited the American Revolution* (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2006), 7.

¹² Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves,*

Commerce and Conflict

Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 216.

¹³ Lax and Pencak, “Knowles Riot,” 3–4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present*, no. 50 (February 1971): 78. It is worth noting Thompson’s struggle with the use of the term “riot” to describe crowd actions in this era. Thompson calls the term a “blunt tool of analysis” when used to describe such a wide variety of crowd actions. Though challenging such broad understandings of the term, he decides that the bread riot’s “characteristic form” was the “risings of the people” across the countryside. While no direct analogue exists in the maritime space, the widespread participation of Boston’s population in the Knowles Riot suggests that the term is appropriate in this instance. For more, see Thompson, 107–109.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁷ Deposition of Josiah Gains in Noble, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 3:234. This document also contains depositions from a wide variety of sailors, both merchant and military, regarding Knowles’s career and his conduct during the riot.

¹⁸ The practice of exclusively pressing sailors from inbound ships arose for a number of reasons (see pp. 108–109 for several examples). It is worth noting that even this policy may have provoked a grievance among pressed sailors who forfeited any unclaimed prize money from their incomplete merchant voyages.

¹⁹ Massachusetts House of Representatives, “Vote on the Confinement of several Officers, &c.,” *Journals of the House of Representative of Massachusetts* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1919–1990), XXIV:213.

²⁰ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:431.

²¹ For Shirley’s account of the militia’s failure to assemble and his opinion of the militia, see William Shirley to the Lords of Trade, December 1, 1747, in *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:417.

²² Many factors may have dissuaded political and military leaders from using force, such as the ambiguity of magisterial powers during civil disturbances and the humanity of the officers. Local leaders also may have feared the subsequent social consequences of using violent force. For a further discussion of these factors, see Thompson, “Moral Economy,” 121.

²³ Governor Shirley’s extreme displeasure with the Boston militia suggests that their actions were abnormally reprehensible, as he says that they “behav’d very ill” and that the militiamen would be given an “opportunity of retrieving their own Honour” following their “Rebellious Breaches of the peace.” For more, see William Shirley to Josiah Willard, November 19, 1747, in *Correspondence of*

William Shirley, 1:408.

²⁴ William Shirley to Josiah Willard, November 19, 1747, in *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:408. The same language was quoted in *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 14, 1747.

²⁵ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:432.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:431.

²⁸ Proclamation of William Shirley, November 21, 1747, in *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:410. The same proclamation can also be found in *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, November 23, 1747.

²⁹ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:431.

³⁰ Though such a drastic reaction may seem unique, it was not implausible that Knowles might fire on the city. During the infamous Burning of Falmouth in October 1775, Captain Henry Mowat bombarded the town, destroying nearly four hundred buildings in response to his being captured and held hostage during the affair known as “Thompson’s War” earlier that year. For more on opposition to British authority in Falmouth, see Dirk Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765-1780* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 252.

³¹ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:435.

³² *Ibid.*, 2:434.

³³ *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, December 17, 1747.

³⁴ Proceedings of the Town Meeting, November 20, 1748, as printed in *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, December 17, 1747.

³⁵ Proclamation of Governor Shirley as published in *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, November 23, 1747 (emphasis original).

³⁶ N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain 1649-1815* (New York: Norton, 2005), 2:313.

³⁷ For more on the incentives of service (or lack thereof) aboard Royal Navy ships, see Rogers, *Press Gang*, 83.

³⁸ Samuel Adams (*Amicus Patriae*), “An address to the inhabitants of the province of the Massachusetts-Bay in New England: more especially, to the inhabitants of Boston” (Pamphlet), (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1747), 5.

³⁹ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 2:313.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Thompson, “Moral Economy,” 79.

⁴² Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 2:315.

⁴³ Rogers, *Press Gang*, 25.

⁴⁴ William Shirley to the Lords of Trade, December 1, 1747, in *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:413.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Michael Macilwee, *Liverpool Underworld: Crime in the City, 1750-1900*

(Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 70.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Report of Captain Thomas Gordon, February 1, 1759, as quoted in Paul Lovejoy and Nicholas Rogers, *Unfree Labour in the Development of the Atlantic World* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 109.

⁴⁹ Denver Brunzman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 62.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 65.

⁵² Denver Brunzman, "The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World," (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2004), 257.

⁵³ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:431.

⁵⁴ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 2:499–500.

⁵⁵ For more on this lawsuit's implications for opponents of impressment, see *ibid.*, 2:314.

⁵⁶ Alexander Broadfoot, the defendant, was not convicted of murder because the lieutenant who held the press gang's warrant was not on board the ship when Broadfoot committed the crime. For a more detailed summary of the circumstances of the case, see Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman 1200-1860: A Social Survey* (London: Collins, 1968), 154–155.

⁵⁷ For the most comprehensive description of this law and its passage, see Dora Mae Clark, "The Impressment of Seamen in the American Colonies," in *Essays in Colonial History Presented to Charles McLean Andres by his Students* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931), 207.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, even Governor Shirley identified this division in the interpretation of the law. He wrote that the opponents of impressment were convinced that the Sixth of Anne was "perpetual," while a litany of British jurists had decided the contrary. For more, see William Shirley to the Boards of Trade, December 1, 1747, in *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:418.

⁵⁹ Clark, "Impressment of Seamen," 214.

⁶⁰ For an example of contemporary claims regarding the unfairness of the West Indies' exemption from impressment, see *Independent Advertiser*, February 8, 1748.

⁶¹ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 2:315.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Rogers, *Press Gang*, 82.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 65.

Commerce and Conflict

⁶⁷ Lovejoy and Rogers, *Unfree Labour*, 109.

⁶⁸ *Independent Advertiser*, February 8, 1748.

⁶⁹ Deposition of Josiah Gains in Noble, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 3:234

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Hoerder, *Crowd Action*, 62.

⁷² *Independent Advertiser*, February 8, 1748.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Whitehall Evening Post*, January 19, 1748.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ This particular report contains several inaccuracies regarding the timeline of the rioting in Boston. For example, the paper mentions that the rioters burned a barge, but it fails to note that the barge taken by the rioters did not actually belong to the Royal Navy. Since this report is so distant from the unrest, it is plausible that there were errors or omissions in the information that was transmitted across the Atlantic.

⁷⁷ Thompson wrote that the moral economy of crowds in British food riots was driven by a “consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations,” but the same applies to Bostonians’ grievances. Though the sailors’ protests were sparked by the act of impressment, they were sustained and enflamed by the perceived violation of established norms. For more, see Thompson, “Moral Economy,” 79.

⁷⁸ Deposition of Joseph Ballard in Noble, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 3:232.

⁷⁹ Deposition of Josiah Gains in Noble, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 3:234.

⁸⁰ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:431.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Noble, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 3:235.

⁸³ Deposition of Jonathan Tarbox in Noble, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 3:235.

⁸⁴ Clark, “Impressment of Seamen,” 207-212.

⁸⁵ *Independent Advertiser*, February 8, 1748

⁸⁶ Brunsmann, “The Evil Necessity” (dissertation), 262.

⁸⁷ Lax and Pencak, “Knowles Riot,” 4.

⁸⁸ Massachusetts House of Representatives, “Resolves on the riotous Proceedings &c.,” *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, XXIV:212. These resolves were also printed in *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 21, 1747.

⁸⁹ The proceedings of the Town Meeting were reprinted in *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, December 17, 1747 (emphasis added).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 14, 1747.

⁹³ Deposition of Gershom Flagg in Noble, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 3:233.

⁹⁴ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:431.

⁹⁵ This population estimate has been carefully constructed by historian Lawrence Kennedy from colonial records. For his findings, see Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Planning the City Upon a Hill: Boston Since 1630* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 255.

⁹⁶ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:431.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ William Shirley to Josiah Willard, November 19, 1747, in *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:406. The same letter was reprinted in *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 14, 1747.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 1:407. See also *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 14, 1747.

¹⁰⁰ Adams, "Address to the Inhabitants," 4.

¹⁰¹ Shirley to Willard, November 19, 1747, in *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:406. See also *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 14, 1747.

¹⁰² Ibid. For slightly different language, see *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 14, 1747. While the text is slightly different on account of either the printing process or errors in transmission, the content is largely the same in tone and message.

¹⁰³ In fact, there was a tradition of British militias not being able to put down such riots. Some of the explanations for this trend have already been mentioned (see n. 22). However, judging by Governor Shirley's other communications, Boston's militiamen seem to have been particularly active in the rioting itself.

¹⁰⁴ Executive Council of Massachusetts Bay, "In Council, November 19, 1747" as printed in *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 21, 1747.

¹⁰⁵ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:432.

¹⁰⁶ William Shirley to Josiah Willard, November 19, 1747, in *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:407. This letter was also printed in *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 14, 1747.

¹⁰⁷ Deposition of Josiah Gains in Noble, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 3:234.

¹⁰⁸ Deposition of John Cathcart in Noble, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 3:235. For a later naval record of the deponent, see *Naval Records of the American Revolution, 1775-1788* (Washington: US Government Publishing Office, 1906), 283, 473. These records show that Cathcart was master of several Continental ships commissioned during the American Revolution, including the *Essex* (1781) and the *Tartar* (1783).

Commerce and Conflict

- ¹⁰⁹ *Independent Advertiser*, February 8, 1748.
- ¹¹⁰ John Noble, *The Libel Suit of Knowles v. Douglass* (Cambridge: John Wilson and Son, 1897), 14.
- ¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ¹¹² See Brunzman, “The Evil Necessity” (dissertation), 264.
- ¹¹³ Douglass, *Summary, Historical and Political*, 253.
- ¹¹⁴ *Boston Evening Post*, December 14, 1747.
- ¹¹⁵ Douglass, *Summary, Historical and Political*, 238.
- ¹¹⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, December 21, 1747.
- ¹¹⁷ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 2:312.
- ¹¹⁸ Massachusetts House of Representatives, “Votes of the House of Representatives,” *Journals of the House of Representative of Massachusetts*, II:300.
- ¹¹⁹ *Boston Evening Post*, December 28, 1747.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹²¹ *Boston Evening Post*, January 18, 1748.
- ¹²² *Independent Advertiser*, January 4, 1748.
- ¹²³ *Independent Advertiser*, February 8, 1748; William Pencak considers this type of language proof of the *Independent Advertiser*’s role as a “vehicle...[of] philosophical critique of Governor Shirley’s administration based upon the ‘Old Whig’ political ideas of John Locke and the ‘New Whig’ variant of William Trenchard and John Gordon.” For a more intensive analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of the *Independent Advertiser*, see William A. Pencak, “Massachusetts Politics in War and Peace, 1676-1776,” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1978), 250–255.
- ¹²⁴ *Independent Advertiser*, February 8, 1748.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*; Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pro Milone*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Tufts University: Perseus Digital Library).
- ¹²⁶ Proceedings of the Town Meeting as recorded in *Boston Weekly News-Letter*, December 31, 1747.
- ¹²⁷ Massachusetts House of Representatives, “Resolves on the riotous Proceedings &c.” as found in *Journals of the House of Representative of Massachusetts*, XXIV:212.
- ¹²⁸ For a brief synopsis of Adams’s relevant background, see Lax and Pencak, “Knowles Riot,” 33–35.
- ¹²⁹ Adams, “Address to the Inhabitants,” 3.
- ¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ¹³² *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹³³ *Boston Evening Post*, December 21, 1747.
- ¹³⁴ “To the Publishers of the Independent Advertiser,” *Independent Advertiser*, February 8, 1748. In this letter published in the *Independent Advertiser*, the

Commerce and Conflict

author directly responds to Douglass's writings, even addressing him by name.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Hutchinson, *History of the Province*, 2:431.

¹³⁷ Bernard Bailyn, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776, Volume I: 1750-1765* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 482.

¹³⁸ Brunsmann, "The Evil Necessity" (dissertation), 249.

¹³⁹ Macilwee, *Liverpool Underworld*, 70.

¹⁴⁰ Bourne, *Cradle of Violence*, 7.

Images

Page 101: "Sir Charles Knowles," c. 1790, Thomas Hudon (artist) and Johan Faber (engraver), The National Maritime Museum, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sir_Charles_Knowles_governor.jpg (accessed December 30, 2017).

Page 103: "The Liberty of the Subject (the Press Gang)," James Gilray (artist) and W. Humphrey (publisher), October 15, 1779, via Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Liberty_of_the_Subject_\(the_Press_Gang\)_\(caricature\)_RMG_PX8527.tiff](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Liberty_of_the_Subject_(the_Press_Gang)_(caricature)_RMG_PX8527.tiff) (accessed December 30, 2017).

Page 113: "Massachusetts colonial governor Thomas Hutchinson," Edward Truman, 1741, Massachusetts Historical Society, via Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ThomasHutchinsonByEdwardTruman.jpg> (accessed December 30, 2017).

Page 123: "Samuel Adams," Samuel Okey, after John Singleton Copley, 1775, mezzotint, National Portrait Gallery, used with permission of the Smithsonian Institution.