

Committee of Correspondence

Until late 1772, political control of Massachusetts remained in the hands of the merchants, who as a class were largely satisfied with the state of relations with the mother country, and were most reluctant to jeopardize peace and prosperity for the sake of an abstract political principle.

As long as the radicals such as Samuel Adams tried to work within the normal political channels, the moderate Whigs were able to restrain them.

The British government provided the radicals with the issue they needed, but it proved to be one which only a separate radical organization could exploit effectively.

In the spring of 1772 rumors began to circulate in Boston to the effect that Great Britain was going to assume responsibility for the salaries of the Superior Court judges, thus making them independent of the people of Massachusetts.

Governor Hutchinson had indeed been corresponding with London about this reform, but no definite news regarding the salaries was known to the public.

The radicals were concerned about the issue, however, and expressed that concern when a town-meeting of May 14, 1772, chose a committee to prepare Instructions for the newly elected representatives.

The committee consisted of nine men: Joseph Warren, Benjamin Church, Josiah Quincy, William Mollineux, William Dennie, William and Joseph Greenleaf, and Thomas and Richard Oil Gray.

The failure of the committee to agree on any instructions raises interesting question. John Cary, in his biography of Joseph Warren, concludes that "Warren and the other radicals on the committee seem to have been outnumbered", and that in the future "Warren and Samuel Adams avoided the mistake of allowing moderates to ruin their plans". (McBride)

On October 27, 1772, Adams wrote to Elbridge Gerry.

"Our enemies would intimidate us, by saying our brethren in the other towns are indifferent about this matter.... I wish we could arouse the continent."

Two days later, he again wrote to Gerry;

"If each town would declare its Sense of these Matters I am persuaded our Enemies would not have it in their power to divide us, in which they have all along shown their dexterity. Pray us your Influence with Salem and other towns."

These lines also give some indication of the arguments used against the radicals in debates in the town-meetings, and possibly within the Instruction committee as well. Adams clearly had considered the likelihood that Hutchinson would block any action through the General Court, and was prepared for the eventuality.

At the October 28 town meeting, after some debate, the attendees decided “by a vast majority” “that a decent and respectful Application ... be made to his excellency the Governor ... whether his excellency had received any advice. relative to this matter....” The meeting voted to petition the governor to permit the General Assembly to convene, so that “that Constitutional Body” might deliberate on the matter.

In order to bypass the moderates who were blocking his program, Adams created a separate radical organization based upon the radical control over the Boston town-meeting. (McBride)

At the town-meeting on November 2, the governor’s reply to the petition was read. Hutchinson had written that he did not feel “his Majestys Service and ... the interest of the Province” required a meeting of the General Assembly, and that furthermore “the Law that authorizes Towns to Assemble, does not make [these matters] the business of a Town Meeting.”

This was strong language, and provoked a reaction which may well have been Adams’ goal all along. The town had attempted to use all legal means of political opposition but had been blocked by the governor; this justified the use of extralegal means.

And the governor, by challenging the town’s right to deal with questions outside the immediate concern of a town government, had aroused anger of which Adams took quick advantage. The meeting immediately voted the governor’s reply to be unsatisfactory, and resolved that they had “a right to Petition the King or his Representatives for the Redress of such Grievances...”

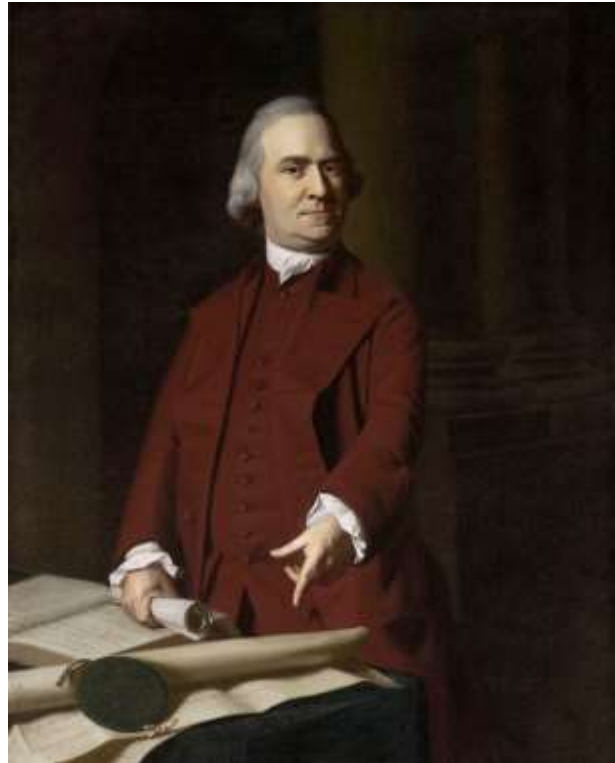
On this wave of feeling, Adams moved the appointment of a Committee of Correspondence, which passed *nemine contradicente* according to the town records.

The purpose of the committee, according to the motion which created it, was,

“to state the Rights of the Colonists ...; to communicate and publish the same to the several Towns in this Province and to the World as the sense of this Town, with the Infringements and Violations thereof that have been, or from time to time may be made — Also requesting of each Town a free communication of their Sentiments on this Subject....”

The committee thus had very flexible instructions; it was not restricted to dealing with any particular issue but was a standing committee which could communicate with anyone about practically anything, past, present, or future. (McBride)

The Boston Committee of Correspondence was formed at the Boston Town Meeting of November 2, 1772 in response to the British government’s decision to pay the governor and Superior Court judges of



Samuel Adams, 1772

Massachusetts with Crown stipends, thereby making them dependent on the Crown rather than the people in assembly. (Battlefields)

With the participation of Samuel Adams and others, among them James Otis, Josiah Quincy, Joseph Warren, Thomas Young and Benjamin Church, the first action of the committee was the preparation of a “Statement of the Rights of the Colonists,” a list of infringements of those rights by Great Britain, and a covering letter to the other towns of Massachusetts.

The “statement of rights” was an effective and well-written piece of radical propaganda – it complained of infringements of liberties that many Massachusetts farmers had never before heard of - but the heart of the radical program lay in the covering letter.

In it the Boston town-meeting requested of the other towns “a free communication of your sentiments” and suggested that if the rights of the colonists were felt to have been stated properly, the towns should instruct their Representatives to support Boston in the next General Court.

The letter and its accompanying statement of rights was sent out during the last week of November, 1772, and Samuel Adams and the other radical leaders must have waited with considerable apprehension to see how the other towns would react.

Astute politicians in both camps were convinced that the reaction would be unfavorable to the radicals. Governor Hutchinson wrote to Lord Dartmouth on November 13 that a system of committees of correspondence was such a foolish scheme that its supporters “must necessarily make themselves ridiculous.”

And James Warren, writing from Plymouth on December 8, told Samuel Adams that,

I shall not fail to exert myself to have as many towns as possible meet, but fear the bigger part of them will not. They are dead, and the dead can't be raised without a miracle.

I am sensible that the Tories spare no pains (as you say) to disparage the measures; which, with their other conduct, shows their apprehension. They are nettled much.

“All are not dead;” came Adams’ quick reply, “and, where there is a spark of patriotic fire, we will rekindle it. Say you that the Tories spare no pains to disparage our measures? I knew they would, and should have greatly doubted of the importance of the measures, if they had not been nettled.” (McBride)

These were accompanied by a letter opening correspondence with other Massachusetts towns, asking for their support and advice. The report was approved on November 20th and distributed to the towns in pamphlet form.

By mid-February, 1773, seventy-eight out of approximately 240 Massachusetts towns, including most of the principal ones, had replied favorably.

Many of the remaining communities were actually not towns but groups of scattered farmers who for sound reasons of economy and convenience were delaying action on the Boston circular until their regular spring business-meeting. (McBride)

BOSTON, APRIL 9, 1773.

SIR,

THE Committee of Correspondence of this Town have received the following Intelligence, communicated to them by a Person of Character in this Place. We congratulate you upon the Acquisition of such respectable Aid as the ancient and patriotic Province of Virginia, the earliest Resolvers against the detestable Stamp-Act, in Opposition to the unconstitutional Measures of the present Administration. The Authenticity of this Advice you may depend upon, as it was immediately received from one of the Honorable Gentlemen appointed to communicate with the other Colonies.

We are,

Your Friends and humble Servants,

Signed by Direction of the Committee for Correspondence in Boston,

William Cooper } Town-Clerk.

To the Town-Clerk of _____, to be immediately delivered to the Committee of Correspondence for your Town, if such a Committee is chosen, otherwise to the Gentlemen the Selectmen, to be communicated to the Town.

Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman of distinction in Virginia, to his Friend in this Town, dated March 14th, 1773.

"I RECEIVED the papers* you sent me, and am much obliged to you for them, our assembly sitting a few days after, they were of use to us. You will see by the enclosed Resolutions the true sentiments of this colony, and that we are endeavouring to bring our sister colonies into the strictest union with us, that we may RESENT in our own hearts any steps that may be taken by administration to deprive any one of us of the least particle of our rights & liberties; we should have done more but we could procure nothing but newspaper accounts of the proceedings in Rhode-Island. I hope we shall not be thus kept in the dark for the future, and that we shall have from the different Committees the earliest intelligence of any motion that may be made by the TYRANTS in England to carry their infernal purposes of enslaving us into execution; I dare venture to assure you the strictest attention will be given on our parts to these grand points."

In the House of Burgesses, in Virginia March, 1773.

"WHEREAS the minds of his Majesty's faithful subjects in this colony have been much disturbed by various rumours and reports of proceedings tending to deprive them of their ancient, legal and constitutional rights.

"And whereas the affairs of this colony are frequently consulted with those of Great Britain, as well as of the neighbouring colonies, which renders a communication of sentiments necessary.

* The Votes and Proceedings of the Town of Boston, and News-Papers, containing the Governor's Speeches, and the Answers of the two Houses.

in order therefore to remove the uncertainties and to quiet the minds of the people, as well as for the other good purposes above mentioned.

"Be it resolved, That a standing committee of correspondence and inquiry be appointed, to consist of eleven persons, viz. the honourable Peyton Randolph, Esq; Robert Carter Nicholas, Richard Bland, Richard Henry Lee, Benjamin Harrison, Edmund Pendleton, Patrick Henry, Dudley Digges, Dabney Carr, Archibald Cary, and Thomas Jefferson, Esqrs; any six of whom to be a committee, whose business it shall be to obtain the most early and authentic intelligence of all such acts and resolutions of the British parliament or proceedings of administration, as may relate to, or affect the British colonies in America, and to keep up and maintain a correspondence and communication with our sister colonies, respecting their important considerations, and the result of such their proceedings from time to time to lay before this house.

"Resolved, That it be an instruction to the said committee, that they do, without delay, inform themselves particularly of the principles and authority, on which was constituted a court of inquiry, said to have been lately held in Rhode-Island, with powers to transport persons accused of offences committed in America, to places beyond the seas to be tried.

"Resolved, That the Speaker of this House do transmit to the Speakers of the different assemblies of the British colonies, on this continent, copies of the said resolutions, and desire they will lay them before their respective assemblies, and request them to appoint some person or persons of their respective bodies, to communicate from time to time with the said committee.

In response to what became known as the Boston Pamphlet, similar committees formed in towns across Massachusetts and in other American colonies, helping to create a network of colonial communication ultimately leading to independence from Great Britain. (NY Library Archives)

Towns, counties, and colonies from Nova Scotia to Georgia had their own committees of correspondence. (Battlefields)

The other committees were no longer willing to follow Boston's leadership without question, however, and showed this by refusing to accept the Solemn League and Covenant. Instead, local committees worked through county conventions to dismantle the old militia system and the Royal courts.

They also began the intimidation of Tories by forcing the resignations of the Mandamus Counsellors. The Boston radicals were quick to recognize the necessity for new tactics, and acted through the Suffolk County convention to influence the deliberations of the Continental Congress and insure the completion of their program. (McBride)

Men on these committees wrote to each other to express ideas, to confirm mutual assistance, and to debate and coordinate resistance to British imperial policy. The network created by committees of correspondence organized and mobilized hundreds of communities across the British North American colonies. (Battlefields)

Committees of Correspondence were longstanding institutions that became a key communications system during the early years of the American Revolution (1772-1776). (Battlefields)

The Boston Committee of Correspondence was theoretically responsible to the town-meeting, but actually operated independently of any control save the will of the radical leaders.

Adams intended the Boston committee to become the mainspring of a network of similar committees which would extend to all the towns of Massachusetts.

Initially, only a small fraction of the towns actually appointed a committee to correspond with Boston, although many expressed agreement in principle. Nevertheless, Adams was able to manipulate the responses, using the Boston Gazette, in such a way that the committee system appeared to be very extensive.

When the tea crisis developed on December 16, 1773, the system only functioned in the port-towns and around Boston. The appearance of strength which the system gave the radicals was sufficient, however, that they were able to direct events which resulted in a direct challenge to British rule. (McBride)

Once the Tea Party led to the Coercive Acts, the committee system quickly spread into most of the towns. (McBride)

The Committees were a way for colonial legislatures to communicate with their agents in London. In the 1760s, the Sons of Liberty used committees of correspondence to organize resistance between cities. The most famous and influential committees of correspondence, however, operated in the 1770s. (Battlefields)

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E X T R A C T S
F R O M T H E
M I N U T E S
O F T H E
C O M M I T T E E
O F C O R R E S P O N D E N C E , O B S E R V A T I O N ,
a n d I N S P E C T I O N , f o r t h e C o u n t y o f L a n -
c a s t e r , h e l d i n t h e B o r o u g h o f L a n c a s t e r , o n
t h e f i r s t a n d s e c o n d D a y s o f S e p t e m b e r , 1 7 7 5 .

R E S O L V E D , T h a t t h e M e m b e r s o f t h i s C o m m i t t e e , i n t h e i r r e s p e c t i v e T o w n s h i p s , m a k e L i s t s o f t h e N a m e s o f a l l N o n - A s s o c i a t o r s , o f t h e A g e o f s i x t e e n a n d u p w a r d s , a n d d e l i v e r i n t h e s a m e t o t h e S t a n d i n g C o m m i t t e e , a t L a n c a s t e r , o n o r b e f o r e t h e f i f t e e n t h D a y o f t h i s i n s t a n t S e p t e m b e r .

R E S O L V E D , T h a t a l l P e r s o n s w h o h a v e c o l l e c t e d o r r e c e i v e d a n y S u m o r S u m s o f M o n e y , w i t h i n t h i s C o u n t y , f r o m a n y P e r s o n o r P e r s o n s , a g r e e a b l e t o t h e R e c o m m e n d a t i o n o f t h e A s s e m b l y o f t h i s P r o v i n c e , d o , o n o r b e f o r e t h e f i f t e e n t h D a y o f t h i s i n s t a n t , p a y t h e s a m e i n t o t h e H a n d s o f t h e C o m m i t t e e ' s T r e a s u r e r ; a n d a t t h e s a m e T i m e f u r n i s h t h e s a i d T r e a s u r e r w i t h a L i s t o f t h e N a m e s o f t h o s e w h o h a v e c o n t r i b u t e d w i t h t h e s e v e r a l S u m s a n n e x e d .

R E S O L V E D , T h a t t h o s e P e r s o n s w h o h a v e n o t c o m p l i e d w i t h t h e R e s o l v e o f t h i s C o m m i t t e e p u b l i s h e d t h e 8 t h u l t . " t o f u r n i s h t h e S t a n d i n g C o m m i t t e e a t L a n c a s t e r , w i t h t h e N a m e s o f t h o s e P e r s o n s w h o h a v e c o n t r i b u t e d t o w a r d s t h e " S e r v i c e o f t h e i r C o u n t r y i n M o n e y , w i t h t h e r e s p e c t i v e S u m s s o c o n t r i b u t e d , " o r p a i d b y t h e m , a n n e x e d t o t h e s a i d N a m e s . " A n d w h o s h a l l n o t c o m p l y w i t h t h e s a i d R e s o l v e , o n o r b e f o r e t h e f i f t e e n t h D a y o f t h i s i n s t a n t ; b e n o t i f i e d a n d r e q u i r e d , t o b e a n d a p p e a r b e f o r e t h i s C o m m i t t e e , o n t h e s e c o n d D a y o f O c t o b e r n e x t , t h a t t h e C o m m i t t e e m a y b e i n f o r m e d o f t h e R e a s o n s , w h y t h e s a i d R e s o l v e i s n o t d u l y c o m p l i e d w i t h .

*Committee-Chamber,
Sept. 4th, 1775.*

Communities responded with news of the reception of the pamphlet, sending copies of the proceedings of their town meetings with their votes and resolutions, often noting agreement with the grievances outlined by the Committee while stating their own views.

Under a growing system of mutual advisement, the Committee informed towns and other colonies of British actions in Boston, notably the arrival of East India Company tea shipments in Boston in 1773 and the impact of Britain's punitive Coercive Acts in 1774, especially the closing of the Boston's harbor.

The Committee also sought ways to relieve Boston's poor. As military action seemed increasingly likely, the Committee tried to prevent colonists from aiding the British army with their labor, skills or supplies, and asked nearby towns to monitor British military maneuvers, while local militias prepared to be called. (NY Library Archives)

In the late summer and autumn of 1774, the colonies, especially Massachusetts, became politically active on a very wide scale and at all political levels, from town-meetings and county conventions to a series of provincial and continental congresses.

Simultaneously, and on an equally wide scale, the colonists began active military preparations.

At this point the revolutionary movement unquestionably had the support of a large majority of the people of Massachusetts.

The dramatic success of the radical program throughout Massachusetts began in November of 1772 with the formation of the Boston Committee of Correspondence. The work of this committee in reaction to a series of challenges from Parliament has rightfully been considered the spark which set off a powder-keg of revolution. (McBride)

The Continental Congress established the Committee of Secret Correspondence to communicate with sympathetic Britons and other Europeans early in the American Revolution. The committee coordinated diplomatic functions for the Continental Congress and directed transatlantic communication and public relations. (State Department)

With the gradual establishment of self-government and the evacuation of the British from Boston in March 1776, the Committee of Correspondence attended to public safety activities in the Boston area until the end of the Revolutionary War.

The Committee monitored the actions of Loyalists and others, while continuing its communication with other towns to strengthen American interests. Now known as the Committee of Correspondence, Inspection and Safety, its meetings during this period were usually chaired by Nathaniel Barber. William Cooper, Town Clerk of Boston, was clerk of the Committee throughout its existence. (NY Library, Archives)

In the 1770s there were three consecutive systems of committees of correspondence:

- The Boston-Massachusetts system

The Boston-Massachusetts system began with the creation of the Boston Committee of Correspondence in November 1772.

- The Inter-colonial system

The inter-colonial system of committees of correspondence originated farther south, in Virginia's House of Burgesses. The burgesses were alarmed by the Crown's response to the Gaspee affair, where a group of Rhode Islanders burned a customs ship.

In response, the imperial government created a commission to investigate the incident and to send any potential perpetrators to England for trial. It was this last act that the House of Burgesses considered unconstitutional, and that caused them to establish a committee of correspondence in March 1773.

They wanted the committee to discuss possible forms of resistance with the other colonial legislatures. They also wanted to open a permanent network of communication between the colonies, so that they could respond collectively to any future imperial incursions on the rights and liberties of American colonists. By early 1774 all of the thirteen colonies except Pennsylvania had an inter-colonial committee of correspondence.

- The post-Coercive Acts system

The third committee system was established in the spring of 1774, in response to the Coercive Acts.

Parliament had passed a series of acts punishing Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party and, upon hearing the news, the Boston Committee of Correspondence quickly spread the word and asked for help resisting the acts. Several inter-colonial committees of correspondence simultaneously called for a general congress of the North American colonies to address and combat the Coercive Acts.

The First Continental Congress met from September to October of 1774. In the three months leading up to the Congress, Americans formed committees of correspondence at the town, county, and colony levels to choose their delegates

Many of these committees continued to meet after they chose delegates, and worked to resist the Coercive Acts in other ways. This committee system absorbed the Boston-Massachusetts system and completely overtook and radicalized the inter-colonial system. (Mount Vernon)

Information here is primarily from New York Library, Archives; Battlefields-org; John McBride; US National Archives; Mount Vernon

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young