

Did Samuel Adams Provoke the Boston Tea Party and the Clash at Lexington?

BY BERNHARD KNOLLENBERG

IN HIS well-known *Sam Adams Pioneer in Propaganda* Prof. John C. Miller states:

“Yet there was an escape from this dilemma [of what to do when the tea arrived at Boston] which, had Sam Adams permitted, . . . would have made unnecessary the Boston Tea Party. If the tea ships anchored below Castle William instead of entering the port of Boston, they could return to England without a pass from the governor, payment of duty, or observance of any of the formalities required by Parliamentary law. . . . [Governor] Hutchinson planned to avert the crisis he saw gathering in Boston by ordering the tea ships to anchor below the Castle so that, if it appeared that the tea could not be landed, they could set sail for the mother country. But Sam Adams had very different plans for the ‘plagued’ East India tea. . . . Adams seldom let slip an opportunity to plunge the colonies deeper into controversy with Great Britain; and he soon showed that he had no intention of allowing the crisis brought on by the East India Tea Act to pass quietly. When the first tea ship [the *Dartmouth*] anchored below Castle William, its captain was summoned before the Boston committee of correspondence, where he was ordered by Adams and other committeemen to bring his ship up to the Boston wharves and land all the cargo except the tea on pain of being tarred and feathered by the Liberty Boys.”¹

¹ John C. Miller, *Sam Adams Pioneer in Propaganda* (1936), 289-290. To similar effect, sketch of Samuel Adams in Clifford K. Sipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates* (1958), X 443.

This passage is supported by the source cited by Miller, a narrative written by Hutchinson around 1778, when under fire for having, it was said, provoked rebellion in Massachusetts. In this, Hutchinson states, "The Governor, foreseeing the difficulty that must attend this affair, advised the consignees to order the vessels when they arrived, to anchor below the Castle; that if it should appear unsafe to land the tea, they might go to sea again; and when the first vessel arrived, she anchored accordingly; but when the master came up to town, Mr. Adams and others, a committee of the town, ordered him, at his peril, to bring the ship up to land the other goods, but to suffer no tea to be taken out."²

Miller, however, cites no contemporary evidence in support of his account, and the only contemporary evidence I have found on the point—a letter of December 1, 1773, from Hutchinson to Governor Tryon of New York—far from supporting Miller's account, states that the Whigs urged the Boston consignees of the tea to return the tea to England (whether on the same vessel or some other, he does not say) before the *Dartmouth* entered port, that the consignees refused to do so and that Hutchinson approved their refusal. This letter reads:

"I have given you an account of the proceedings here in respect to the tea concern, until the 21st of November . . . [On the 28th] one of the ships with 114 chests of tea arrived, and is below the castle [i.e. outside the port].

"Notifications were posted up in all parts of the town . . . requiring all persons in town or country to assemble. . . .

² Hutchinson's narrative, "Hutchinson in America," in *The Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson . . . With an Account of . . . His Government of the Colony . . .* I, 100-101. As to the approximate date when written, *same* 105. For a similar account, Hutchinson, *History of Massachusetts-Bay*, (Mayo ed.), III, 307-8. Two other sources cited by Miller for the paragraph in which the quoted passage appears, have no bearing on this point.

They soon resolved that the tea should not be landed, that no duty should be paid, and that it should be sent back to England. . . . The friends of old Mr. Clarke . . . pressed his sons and the other consignees [including Hutchinson's sons] to a full compliance; but they could obtain no more than an offer to suspend the sale of the tea until the East India Company could be made acquainted with the state of affairs, and some of the consignees were averse even to this . . . I hope the gentlemen will continue firm, and should not have the least doubt of it, if it was not for the solicitation of the friends of Mr. Clarke."³

The Whigs' desire to have the tea sent back to England provided this would be done without duty being paid on it, is further shown by their proceedings after the *Dartmouth* had entered port but before the tea became liable to seizure and sale by British customs officers at Boston for non-payment of duty.

The following passage from a letter of the Reverend Samuel Cooper, minister of the Brattle Square Church, Boston, to Benjamin Franklin dated December 17, 1773, the day after the Tea Party, gives the Whig version of these proceedings:

"Upon the arrival of the tea an assembly of the people was called—it proved as large as any ever known here—of which Mr. [John] Hancock was moderator. . . . The moderator and people were strongly desirous of preserving the tea untouched, for the East-India Company. . . . They considered, however, that landing the tea would insure the duty. . . . They insisted, therefore, that it should go back in the same bottoms. They urged this upon the consignees . . . with great earnestness, from an apprehension that the tea,

³ *Mass. Hist. Soc. Proc. for 1873-1875*, 168. The addressee is identified in James K. Hosmer, *The Life of Thomas Hutchinson* . . . (1896), 299. Hosmer omitted the passage unfavorable to Hutchinson concerning the refusal of the consignees to send the tea back to England before the *Dartmouth* entered port and Hutchinson's approval of this refusal.

in the present temper of the Province, would not be safe; but in vain . . . The master and owner were then called, who, seeing the irresistible torrent, engaged that the tea should return as it came. Two other vessels, freighted with it, arrived, and the same engagement was made for them.

"There we thought the matter would have ended. But the Governor, consignees, revenue officers, etc. raised obstacles to this measure and seemed to choose that the tea should be destroyed, and the exasperation of both countries heightened. Another assembly of the people was called, of which a country gentleman [Samuel P. Savage] was moderator. The owner of the ship first arrived, appeared before them and pleaded that if they held him to his engagement to carry the tea back, he should be ruined for want of clearances, etc. He was desired by the people to apply to the custom-house for a clearance, which he did, and was refused. He was then desired to wait on the Governor at Milton, for a pass at the castle, which also was refused.

"The people waited for his return till dark, last evening. As soon as the Governor's refusal was known the assembly was dissolved. Just before the dissolution, two or three hundred persons, in dress and appearance like Indians, passed by the Old South meeting-house, where the assembly was held, gave a war-whoop and hastened to the wharf where . . . they soon emptied all the chests into the harbor, to the amount of about three hundred and forty."⁴

Cooper's account is corroborated not only by other contemporary Whig accounts⁵ but by Hutchinson's own contemporary letters.

On December 17, 1773, he wrote Lord Dartmouth, Secretary of State for the Colonies, "The owner of the ship

⁴ *Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll.* Fourth Ser. IV (1858), 374-375.

⁵ John Andrews of Boston to his brother-in-law, William Barrell of Philadelphia, Dec. 18, 1773, *Mass. Hist. Soc. Proc.* for 1864-1865, 325-326; Samuel Adams to Arthur Lee, Dec. 31, 1773, Harry A. Cushing, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, II, 75-76.

'Dartmouth' which arrived with the first teas, having been repeatedly called upon by what are called the Committees of Correspondence to send the ships to sea, and refusing, a meeting of the people was called, and the owners required to demand a clearance from the custom-house, which was refused; and then a permit from the naval officer to pass the castle was also refused; after which he was required to apply to me for the permit, and yesterday, towards evening, came to me at Milton, and I soon satisfied him that no such permit would be granted until the vessel was regularly cleared. He returned to town after dark in the evening and reported to the meeting the answer I had given him. Immediately, thereupon, numbers of people cried out, 'A mob! a mob!' left the house, repaired to the wharf, where three of the vessels lay aground, having on board 340 chests of tea, and in two hours' time it was wholly destroyed."⁶

About the same time, Hutchinson wrote Israel Mauduit, "The owner was required first to apply to the custom-house for a clearance, and that being refused, to me for a pass, which you will easily suppose I did not grant."⁷

And on January 1, 1774, he wrote Francis Bernard, his predecessor as Governor of Massachusetts, "After the usurpers of government had tried every method they could think of to force the tea back to England, and all in vain, they left what they call their lawful assembly in Dr. Sewall's meeting-house, and reassembled at Griffin's Wharf, and in two or three hours destroyed three hundred and forty chests.

"If there is any blame, they say it must be upon the Governor, who refused to give the ships passes at the castle, when demanded of him, which they say he ought to

⁶ *Mass. Hist. Soc. Proc.* for 1873-1875, 172-173.

⁷ *Same*, 170. The letter is dated "December, 1773." Israel Mauduit was Hutchinson's agent in the proceedings before the Privy Council in which Franklin was denounced for having procured and sent some of Hutchinson's letters to Thomas Cushing, Speaker of the Massachusetts House, Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 443-446, 458-477.

have done, though the ships had not cleared at the custom-house.

“The destruction of the tea is an unfortunate event, and it was what everybody supposed impossible, after so many men of property had made part of the meetings, and were in danger of being liable for the value of it.

“It would have given me a much more painful reflection if I had saved it by any concession to a lawless and highly criminal assembly of men to whose proceedings the loss must be consequently attributed, and the probability is that it was part of their plan from the beginning.”⁸

I call your attention particularly to Hutchinson’s statement to Dartmouth of his having soon satisfied the owner of the *Dartmouth* that “no such permit would be given” and to Bernard that, while he recognized the destruction of the tea was unfortunate, it “would have given me a much more painful reflection if I had saved it by any concession to a lawless and highly criminal assembly of men.” These statements, it will be seen, imply that Hutchinson’s refusal was based not on his supposed lack of authority to grant the requested pass but on his determination not to make any concession to the demand of what he deemed a lawless assembly.

There is further evidence of Hutchinson’s attitude, in connection with a rumor that the captains of the tea ships were going to try to avoid destruction of the tea by slipping out of the harbor with the tea on board even though no clearance or pass was obtained. Hearing of this, Hutchinson took steps to prevent it, as we know from his letter to Mauduit previously quoted on another point, in which he wrote, “Upon information of an intention to go down with the ships without a clearance, I renewed to Colonel Leslie [commander at the Castle] the orders to stop all vessels

⁸ *Mass. Hist. Soc. Proc.* for 1873-1875, 174.

without a pass, and gave notice to Admiral Montague [in command of the British ships of war at Boston] who disposed his ships to prevent their passing through other channels. . . .”⁹

Thus Hutchinson’s contemporary correspondence, in contradistinction to his later account, establishes the following points:

(1) The Whigs tried to have the tea on the *Dartmouth* sent back to England before it had been brought into port and became liable to duty;

(2) They sought to have the tea sent back after the *Dartmouth* and other tea ships had entered port, provided this would be done without payment of duty;

(3) They destroyed the tea only to prevent it from being seized and sold, followed by application of part of the proceeds of the sale to payment of the duty they were determined should not be paid; and

(4) Hutchinson was pleased that the consignees did not send back the tea to England before it became liable to duty; refused to grant a pass for the vessels to sail with the tea on board after it had become liable for duty, though apparently believing he had authority to grant the pass; and took steps to prevent the tea ships from slipping out of the harbor without a pass when that was the only remaining way to return the tea to England without payment of duty.

As to Adams, I have no doubt that he planned to have the tea destroyed rather than let it be seized and sold for unpaid duty and that he was pleased when his followers did not fail him. But this assumption is perfectly consistent with the view that he preferred to have the tea sent back and thus avoid a clash provided this could be done without payment of the duty.

⁹ *Same*, 171.

My other question, indicated by the title to this paper, is whether there is evidence to support the charge that Adams encouraged Captain Parker, in command of the militia at Lexington, to make a stand there in the hope of provoking bloodshed and thus consolidating colonial public opinion in favor of rebellion.

This charge apparently has its source in a remark by Harold Murdock in his "Historic Doubts on the Battle of Lexington" published in 1916, and repeated in his *The Nineteenth of April 1775* published seven years later. In discussing the imprudence of Parker's stationing his men on Lexington Green, where they could not possibly make a successful stand, instead of marching them to Concord to help protect the military stores there, Murdock thus addressed his readers:

"Has it ever occurred to you that Parker acted under orders, that the post he took was not of his choosing? Samuel Adams, the great agitator, had been a guest at Parson Clark's [in Lexington] for days, and he was the dynamo that kept the revolutionary machine in motion. The blood shed by Preston's men in King Street had been ably used by Adams to solidify the popular cause, and now did he feel that the time had come to draw once more the British fire?"¹⁰

Since that time, a number of other writers have asked the same question with an intimation that the answer might well be Yes.¹¹ And in an article entitled "Lexington The End of a Myth . . . Was the clash deliberately organized by 'Patriot' leaders in order to provoke an incident, after which there could be no retreat?" published in the June 1959 issue

¹⁰ Murdock, "Historic Doubts," *Mass. Hist. Soc. Proc.*, vol. 49 (1916), pp. 361-385 at 374; Murdock, *Nineteenth of April* (1923), 24-25.

¹¹ Esther Forbes, *Paul Revere & The World He Lived In* (1942), 255; Arthur B. Tourtellot, "Harold Murdock's *The Nineteenth of April*", August 1959 issue of *American Heritage*; Tourtellot, *William Diamond's Drum: The Beginning of the War of the American Revolution* (1959), 112-113, 125-127.

of *History Today*, John A. Barton explicitly charged Adams with having deliberately provoked the bloodshed at Lexington.

"What were armed men doing," writes Barton, "on a quiet village green eight miles from the area [Concord] they were supposed to defend? Unfortunately, most historians have failed to take into account the most obvious explanation—the Lexington militia played out its grim part that April morning because they were told to by Samuel Adams, and for no other reason. . . .

"Adams," he continues, "had long since established a truly remarkable reputation as a fiery, long-winded, hell-raising-man-of-honest-convictions. . . . His first real outburst [however] came in March 1770, with the so-called Boston Massacre, when he swooped through Massachusetts in a furious attempt to convince his audiences that the death of five ruffians should be used as an excuse for civil war. Luckily, he failed; but he saw his niche ready and waiting, and proceeded to occupy it with the utmost aplomb. . . . And now, here was Revere, in Lexington with the most exciting news imaginable. Gage had finally made his long-awaited mistake. Adams must have been beside himself with joy; there had not been such an opportunity since the Boston débâcle five years before. . . . here was a prime opportunity to crush his opponents who argued for peace, and weld the main body of public opinion behind the freedom-mongers. There was only one question: how could it be done?

"The answer lay in Captain Parker's pitifully inadequate leadership. . . . while Parker nodded, happy and relieved, it was Adams who would point out that there was no need to go to Concord; that Colonel Barrett had more men than he needed to defend the arsenal. . . . All they had to do was to stand their ground like free and honest men . . . and they would be heroes. . . .

"It was a confused fight with wild, senseless shooting on both sides; Jonas Parker with a bayonet in this throat; Bob Munroe and Isaac Muzzey, dead; Sam Hadley dying; Nat Farmer, wounded; John Brown, dead . . . hot-headed patriots vigorously pushed the story of the massacre of helpless farmers to help Congress in its plan to raise an army with the full backing of the united colonies. The success of this venture far exceeded Adams' wildest hopes."¹²

What is the evidence for this charge against Adams? The answer is none, absolutely none. But the tale has already begun to take hold. I have been asked more than once in the past year, how could I retain my respect for Adams in the teeth of the recent "proof" of his responsibility for the death of the men of Lexington and the ensuing war which might otherwise have been averted.

In closing, I wish to call attention to a footnote by Murdock to his question as to Adams' part in the Lexington fight, stating "It was the rattle of British . . . musketry that is alleged to have drawn from him [Adams], on the 19th of April, the oft-quoted expression 'Oh, what a glorious morning is this.'"¹³ This expression and its supposed hidden meaning comes from William Gordon, who wrote in his history of the Revolution, "During this interesting period [the British approach to Lexington Green] Messrs. S. Adams and Hancock, whose residence was near at hand, quitted and removed to a further distance. While walking alone, Mr. Adams exclaimed '*O! what a glorious morning is this!*' in the belief that it would eventually liberate the colony from all subjection to Great Britain; his companion did not penetrate his meaning, and thought the allusion was only to the aspect of the sky."¹⁴

¹² *History Today*, IX (June 1959), 382-391 et 385-390.

¹³ Murdock, *The Nineteenth of April*, 24-25 n.

¹⁴ William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States* (1794), I, 311. (The first edition was 1788).

Just how Gordon penetrated the hidden meaning of this remark which the companion, presumably Hancock, took at its face, is not explained. Until further enlightened, I prefer the simpler explanation, especially since Adams was apparently not near enough to Lexington Green when the fight began to hear the firing on which Gordon's far-fetched interpretation of the remark is based.¹⁵

¹⁵ As to Adams apparently having left Lexington before the fight, see Elbridge H. Goss, *The Life of Colonel Paul Revere* (1906), I, 228; Forbes, *Paul Revere*, 255, 263.

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