

The Shoemaker, the Merchant & the Tea Party
George R. T. Hewes, John Hancock, and the Transformation of Social Relations
during the Revolutionary Era

Document Packet

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Table 1:

Wealth Distribution in Colonial Boston		
<i>Percentage of wealth held by the richest 10% and the poorest 30% of the population</i>		
Year	Richest 10%	Poorest 30%
1684-1699	41.2	3.3
1700-1715	54.5	2.8
1716-1725	61.7	2.0
1726-1735	65.6	1.9
1736-1745	58.6	1.8
1746-1755	55.2	1.8
1756-1765	67.5	1.4
1766-1775	61.1	2.0

Source: Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 1979.

Document 1

George Robert Twelves Hewes' Account of his First Meeting with John Hancock as told to Benjamin Thatcher (1835)

It was about this time that he became acquainted personally with John Hancock, who, at this period, was, in connection with his uncle Thomas, at a store in Dock Square. He came in one day to get a rent mended in what was called a 'channel pump.' Rhoades [the shoemaker to whom Hewes was apprenticed] handed it to George, to try his best upon it, such custom being too good to be slighted. He fixed it out nicely, and carried it to the owner. Hancock was much pleased with the boy's conduct, and it being not long before "New- Year's," invited him to "come and see him" on that occasion, and bid him a "happy New- Year," according to the custom of the day. George promised to do so. When the day came he mentioned the matter to Rhoades, and asked his advice in the crisis. The Irishman thought it "a good wind-fall," and earnestly recommended making the most of it. George washed his face, and put his best jacket on, and proceeded straightway to the Hancock House, (as it is still called,) then probably tenanted by the young man something after the fashion of a Bachelor's Hall. His heart was in his mouth, but assuming a cheerful courage, he knocked at the front door, and took his hat off.

The servant came:

"Is 'Squire Hancock at home, Sir?" enquired Hewes, making a bow.

He was introduced directly to the kitchen, and requested to seat himself, while report should be made above stairs. The man came down directly, with a new varnish of civility suddenly spread over his face. He ushered him into the 'Squire's sitting-room, and left him to make his obeisance. Hancock remembered him, and addressed him kindly. George was anxious to get through, and he commenced a desperate speech — "as pretty a one," he says, "as he any way knew how," — intended to announce the purpose of his visit, and to accomplish it, in the same breath.

"Very well, my lad," said the 'Squire — now take a chair, my lad."

He sat down, scared all the while (as he now confesses,) "almost to death," while Hancock put his hand into his breeches-pocket and pulled out a crown-piece, which he placed softly in his hand, thanking him at the same time for his punctual attendance, and his compliments. He then invited his young friend to drink his health — called for wine — poured it out for him — and ticked glasses with him, — a feat in which Hewes, though he had never seen it performed before, having acquitted himself with a creditable dexterity, hastened to make his bow again, and secure his retreat, though not till the 'Squire had extorted a sort of half promise from him to come the next New- Year's — which, for a rarity, he never discharged.

Source: Benjamin Thatcher, *Traits of the Tea Party* (New York, 1835), pp. 52–55.

Document 2

George Robert Twelves Hewes' Account of the Boston Tea Party as told to James Hawkes (1834)

Although the excitement which had been occasioned by the wanton massacre of our citizens [the Boston Massacre], had in some measure abated, it was never extinguished until open hostilities commenced, and we had declared our independence. The citizens of Boston continued inflexible in their demand, that every British soldier should be withdrawn from the town, and within four days after the massacre, the whole army decamped. But the measures of the British parliament, which led the American colonies to a separation from that government, were not abandoned. And to carry into execution their favourite project of taxing their American colonies, they employed a number of ships to transport a large quantity of tea into the colonies, of which the American people were apprised, and while resolute measures were taking in all the capital towns to resist the project of British taxation, the ships arrived, which the people of Boston had long expected.

The particular object of sending this cargo of tea to Boston at that time, and the catastrophe which befell it, have been referred to in the preface. It has also been recorded, among the most important and interesting events in the history of the American revolution; but the rehearsal of it at this time, by a witness, and an actor in that tragicomical scene, excites in the recollection of it a novel and extraordinary interest.

On my inquiring of Hewes if he knew who first proposed the project of destroying the tea, to prevent its being landed, he replied that he did not; neither did he know who or what number were to volunteer their services for that purpose. But from the significant allusion of some persons in whom I had confidence, together with the knowledge I had of the spirit of those times, I had no doubt but that a sufficient number of associates would accompany me in that enterprise.

The tea destroyed was contained in three ships, laying near each other, at what was called at that time Griffin's wharf, and were surrounded by armed ships of war; the commanders of which had publicly declared, that if the rebels, as they were pleased to style the Bostonians, should not withdraw their opposition to the landing of the tea before a certain day, the 17th day of December, 1773, they should on that day force it on shore, under the cover of their cannon's mouth. On the day preceding the seventeenth, there was a meeting of the citizens of the county of Suffolk, convened at one of the churches in Boston, for the purpose of consulting on what measures might be considered expedient to prevent the landing of the tea, or secure the people from the collection of the duty. At that meeting a committee was appointed to wait on Governor Hutchinson, and request him to inform them whether he would take any measures to satisfy the people on the object of the meeting. To the first application of this committee, the governor told them he would give them a definite answer by five o'clock in the afternoon. At the hour appointed, the committee again repaired to the governor's house, and on inquiry found he had gone to his country seat at Milton, a distance of about six miles. When the committee returned

and informed the meeting of the absence of the governor, there was a confused murmur among the members, and the meeting was immediately dissolved, many of them crying out, Let every man do his duty, and be true to his country; and there was a general huzza for Griffins wharf. It was now evening, and I immediately dressed myself in the costume of an Indian, equipped with a small hatchet, which I and my associates denominated the tomahawk, with which, and a club, after having painted my face and hands with coal dust in the shop of a blacksmith, I repaired to Griffins wharf, where the ships lay that contained the tea. When I first appeared in the street, after being thus disguised, I fell in with many who were dressed, equipped and painted as I was, and who fell in with me, and marched in order to the place of our destination. When we arrived at the wharf, there were three of our number who assumed an authority to direct our operations, to which we readily submitted. They divided us into three parties, for the purpose of boarding the three ships which contained the tea at the same time. The name of him who commanded the division to which I was assigned, was Leonard Pitt. The names of the other commanders I never knew. We were immediately ordered by the respective commanders to board all the ships at the same time, which we promptly obeyed. The commander of the division to which I belonged, as soon as we were on board the ship, appointed me boatswain, and ordered me to go to the captain and demand of him the keys to the hatches and a dozen candles. I made the demand accordingly, and the captain promptly replied, and delivered the articles; but requested me at the same time to do no damage to the ship or rigging. We then were ordered by our commander to open the hatches, and take out all the chests of tea and throw them overboard, and we immediately proceeded to execute his orders; first cutting and splitting the chests with our tomahawks, so as thoroughly to expose them to the effects of the water. In about three hours from the time we went on board, we had thus broken and thrown overboard every tea chest to be found in the ship; while those in the other ships were disposing of the tea in the same way, at the same time. We were surrounded by British armed ships, but no attempt was made to resist us. We then quietly retired to our several places of residence, without having any conversation with each other, or taking any measures to discover who were our associates; nor do I recollect of our having had the knowledge of the name of a single individual concerned in that affair, except that of Leonard Pitt, the commander of my division, who I have mentioned. There appeared to be an understanding that each individual should volunteer his services, keep his own secret, and risk the consequences for himself. No disorder took place during that transaction, and it was observed at that time, that the stillest night ensued that Boston had enjoyed for many months.

During the time we were throwing the tea overboard, there were several attempts made by some of the citizens of Boston and its vicinity, to carry off small quantities of it for their family use. To effect that object, they would watch their opportunity to snatch up a handful from the deck, where it became plentifully scattered, and put it into their pockets. One Captain O'Conner, whom I well knew, came on board for that purpose, and when he supposed he was not noticed, filled his pockets, and also the lining of his coat. But I had detected him, and gave information to the captain of what he was doing. We were ordered to take him into custody, and just as he was stepping from the vessel, I seized him by the skirt of his coat, and in attempting to pull him back, I tore it off; but springing

forward, by a rapid effort, he made his escape. He had however to run a gauntlet through the crowd upon the wharf; each one, as he passed, giving him a kick or a stroke.

The next day we nailed the skirt of his coat, which I had pulled off, to the whipping post in Charlestown, the place of his residence, with a label upon it, commemorative of the occasion which had thus subjected the proprietor to the popular indignation.

Another attempt was made to save a little tea from the ruins of the cargo, by a tall aged man, who wore a large cocked hat and white wig, which was fashionable at that time. He had slightly slipped a little into his pocket, but being detected, they seized him, and taking his hat and wig from his head, threw them, together with the tea, of which they had emptied his pockets, into the water. In consideration of his advanced age, he was permitted to escape, with now and then a slight kick.

The next morning, after we had cleared the ships of the tea, it was discovered that very considerable quantities of it was floating upon the surface of the water; and to prevent the possibility of any of its being saved for use, a number of small boats were manned by sailors and citizens, who rowed them into those parts of the harbour wherever the tea was visible, and by beating it with oars and paddles, so thoroughly drenched it, as to render its entire destruction inevitable.

Source: James Hawkes, *Retrospect of the Boston Tea- Party* (New York, 1834), pp. 36–41.

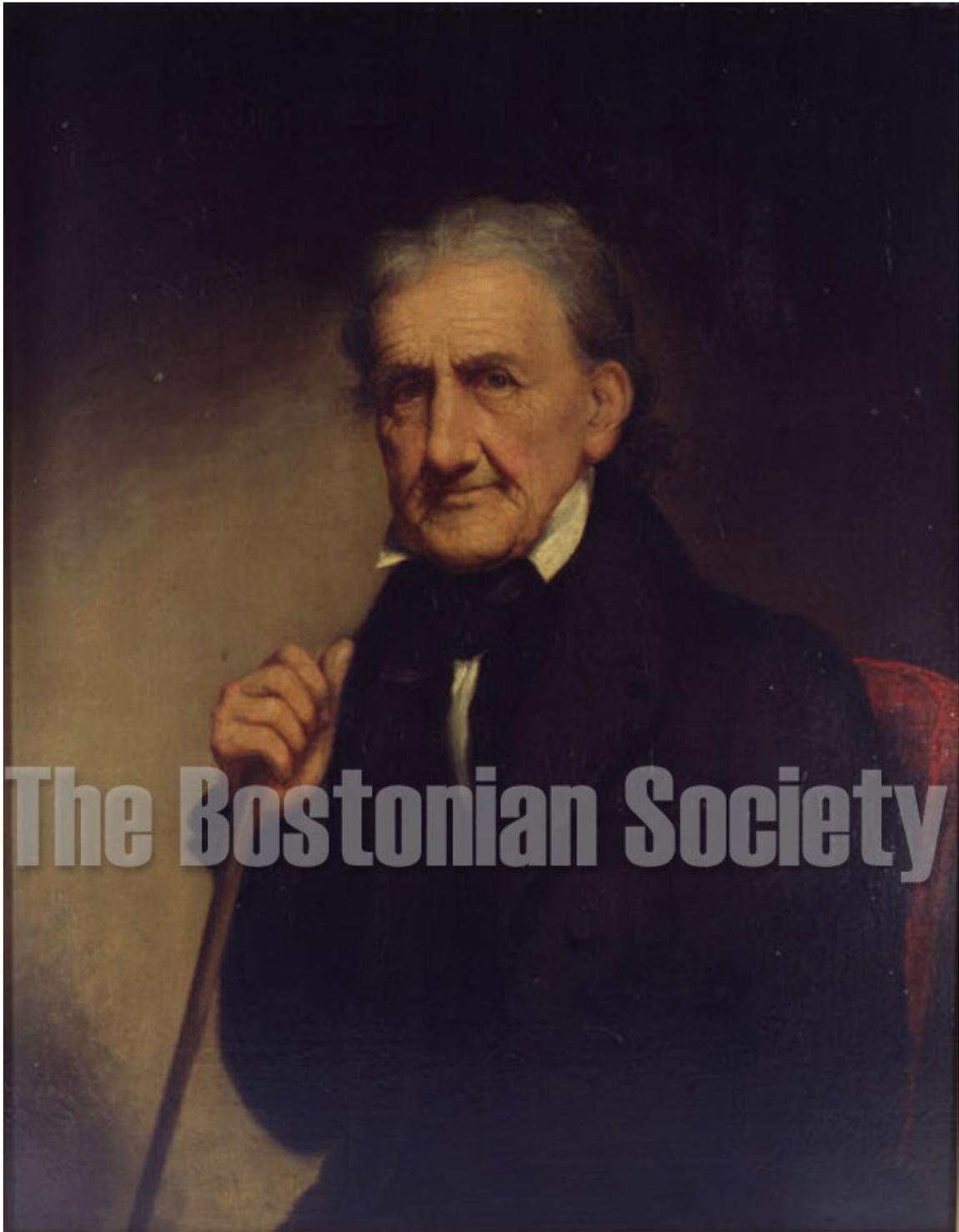
Document 3

George Robert Twelves Hewes' Account of John Hancock's Role in Boston Tea Party as told to Benjamin Thatcher (1835)

It will be inferred from certain proceedings of the afternoon meeting, already referred to, that the issue was anticipated, and under the circumstances connived at, by some of the leaders of the popular cause, not to say by them all. The probability is, we conclude, that it was formally agreed on among those who had the best right to decide upon matters of such interest; reserving, of course, the publicity of the affair, as far as it was deemed indispensable both to its speedy execution, and its decorous management throughout. We have never understood, to be sure, till now, that these persons were known to be at the wharf — or ever suspected to be. There were obvious reasons for general delicacy of their conduct at this crisis. Mr. Hewes, however, positively affirms, as of his own observation, that Samuel Adams and John Hancock were both actively engaged in the process of destruction.

Of the latter he speaks most particularly, being entirely confident that he was himself at one time engaged with him in the demolition of the same chest of tea. He recognized him not only by his ruffles making their appearance in the heat of the work, from under the disguise which pretty thoroughly covered him, — and by his figure, and gait; — but by his features, which neither his paint nor his loosened club of hair behind wholly concealed from a close view; — and by his voice also, for he exchanged with him an Indian grunt, and the expression "u me knoio you" which was a good deal used on that occasion for a countersign. This is a curious reminiscence, but we believe it a mistake.

Source: Benjamin Thatcher, *Traits of the Tea Party* (New York, 1835), pp. 192–193.



The Centenarian

Painted by Joseph Cole (1835)

Source: The Bostonian Society, Old State House Museum

[http://rfi.bostonhistory.org/bostoncoll/FULL/_GLOBAL_INTERNALIMAGES_AF0WPTT0.jpg]