Remarkable as it may seem, Boston and the Massachusetts Bay Colony were free of rioting and general instability during its first half century of existence, from 1630 to 1684. In the seventeenth century there were Indian wars, crime, witch hunts, religious controversies, and struggles over land and over governance, some of which had violent consequences. But in comparison to other colonies, Massachusetts was relatively peaceful and devoid of major conflicts that ripped the populace apart. Historians have posited several reasons for this first century of calm. The pervasiveness and acceptance of Puritan religious ideology, the homogeneous population of the covenanted towns, a surprising economic prosperity, and the presence of a fair political and judicial system all
worked to promote harmony and satisfaction. There were “no riots, no mobs, no disruptions of the judicial process by gangs of aggrieved plaintiffs,” wrote two historians.1 This period of relative peace changed in 1684 with the resurgence of British imperial rule and the revocation of the charter, and the creation of the royal colony in 1692. By the turn of the century, a new era began that was anything but peaceful.

The traditional view of eighteenth-century Boston is of a prosperous and stable seaport community. The classic idyllic image describes Boston as “a thriving English town,” in which “Bostonians lived well.” It was the “best policed and most orderly city in colonial America,” where “public disorder was rare.” This generally optimistic rendering also has its detractors. One view is that the town was “notorious” for its mobs. It is surprising there were not more riots, “considering the people’s open verbal hostility to English policies and officials.”2 Violence did occur, more so than in other colonial towns. Indeed, the town led pre-Revolutionary America as the colonial center for urban violence and community unrest. Among some eighteenth-century colonists, Boston had an unenviable reputation for violence.

A classic eighteenth-century history of British settlement in North America by a Massachusetts colonist, William Douglass, pointed an unerring finger at Boston’s riots. “Our Province in a peculiar Manner . . . requires some more severe Acts against Riots, Mobs, and Tumults. 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 it self very good; because they become Nurseries for dangerous Tumults.”3

A Variety of Riots

Throughout the eighteenth century, and before encounters with the British would bring on the War for Independence, poor Bostonians formed into violent crowds to express their discontent at local conditions. At a minimum, twenty-eight riots occurred in Boston from 1700 to 1764. In comparison, in this period, Philadelphia had only six riots, and New York, only four. Boston’s riots had many causes. Each differed in the scope and levels of violence perpetrated, and each event had its own special crowd makeup.

Major disorder broke out in Boston when food became scarce because of war, hoarding, or exportation. With their plight ignored by local authorities,
lower-class Bostonians reacted to these food shortages by attacking granaries or ships laden with grain. In 1710, 1711, and 1713, increased grain prices due to Queen Anne’s War and merchant hoarding and exporting of foodstuffs led to a series of violent popular explosions. Poor harvests, upper-class attempts at food monopolies, and enmity at price-fixing by local butchers caused a major episode of communal social violence in 1737, and a minor one in 1741. These food riots engendered consternation among local officials and the upper classes, who were largely impotent in dealing with this lower order backlash.

Hostility to British imperial regulations, shared by Bostonians of both lower and upper classes, smoldered throughout the pre-Revolutionary period. Customs riots against the stifling Acts of Trade broke out in 1701, 1723, and 1735. A long-standing controversy about whether English naval captains had the right to impress colonial Americans into service resulted in several riots in Boston—two in 1741, one in 1746, and the worst riot in 1747. During this last riot, thousands of common people in Boston rioted for three days against the forcing of merchant seamen into involuntary service in the British navy. In doing so, the rioters kept the royal governor and the provincial and town governments as virtual hostages.

An assortment of other reasons stimulated lawbreaking by Bostonians. All classes often rioted when social conventions and morality seemed threatened. Two major examples of this norm-enforcement violence were the brothel riots of 1734 and 1737. Anti-Catholic sentiment merged with recreational rowdiness and hostility toward the upper-classes to produce serious violent affrays during “Pope Day” celebrations on November 5 of each year. While violent skirmishes occurred ubiquitously on Pope Days, major disorders of this sort carried out by the poor erupted in 1745, 1747, 1755, 1762, and 1764. Besides these anti-Catholic, antirich affrays, riots in which the lower classes vented their hostility to the upper classes occurred in 1711, 1725, 1743, 1749, and 1755. Thus, Bostonians used communal social violence as a wide-ranging tool of social reconstruction to cope with a complex bevy of complaints that they could not otherwise resolve.

This variegated collection of urban mayhem does not include the well-known riots of the American Revolution that began in 1765. Historians scrutinized in detail Boston’s Revolutionary acts of violence, such as the Stamp Act riots of 1765, the Boston Massacre of 1770, and the Boston Tea Party of 1773. Studies of the makeup and leadership of these crowd actions are familiar territory for students of history. Moreover, this investigation examines riots that do
not attempt to replace or alter the political system. Thus, this narrative will not
discuss these well-known affrays of the Revolution. It is the long list of lesser-
known tumultuous upheavals, predating the Revolution, that is the focus here.

Boston’s reputation as a riotous town evoked serious consequences. As early
as 1721, the General Court passed a riot act because of disturbances in Boston.
An outraged town meeting protested, denying the charge: “the people of this
Town . . . may Justly Claim the title of being Loyal, Peaceable and Desirous of
good order as any of his Majesties Subjects whatsoever.” Contrary to the views
of selectmen, direct action continued to plague the community and besmirch its
reputation. Because of continuing outbreaks of violence, another riot act of 1750
focused on Boston. This statute prohibited assemblies of twelve or more, armed
with clubs or weapons, or fifty unarmed people. Again, in 1756, the legislature,
horrified by the violence of the November Pope Day riot of 1755, took aim at
Boston. This law was to “prevent riotous, tumultuous and disorderly assemblies,
of more than three persons, all or any of them armed with sticks, clubs or any
kind of weapons, or disguised with vizards, or painted or discolored faces, or in
any manner disguised having any kind of imagery or pageantry, in any street,
lane or place in Boston.” Boston’s Pope Day violence continued unabated, caus­
ing Chief Justice Thomas Hutchinson, in 1764, to write another and more strin­
gent statute. He defined a riot as “an Intent to commit some unlawful Act.” If
the rioters “take not one Step they ought be punished for this Intent; if they
move forward, it is a Rout; if they commit one Act it is a Riot.” The question
is, why were Bostonians considerably more riotous than their counterparts in
other seaport towns?

Economic Conditions and Rioting

A possible reason for the population’s unrest, which made Boston dissimi­
lar from other seaports, was the town’s economy in the eighteenth century.
There was a critical disparity between Boston, with its stagnant economy, and
the more prosperous Philadelphia and New York. There were few riots in the
other towns, and politics did not engender the violence and polarization that
occurred in Boston. One historian remarked about the “low frequency of com­
munal crowd activities” in New York and Philadelphia. Throughout the cen­
tury, Boston was noteworthy for the general growth of wealth for the upper
classes, and a narrowing economic base for those lower on the economic ladder.
"The last twenty years of the colonial period were marked by great hardship" in Boston, wrote a historian. A summation of the social and economic historiography of the period avowed that the available statistical evidence from Boston showed "increasing and pronounced inequality, poverty, and general economic depression from the 1730s." Compared to New York and Philadelphia, "Boston may have been one of the few depressed or stagnant areas in eighteenth-century America." The peculiar economic fragility of Boston could lead to violence. For a good portion of the century, the laboring poor suffered most from the town’s ongoing economic doldrums. There were many reasons for Boston’s unique economic slide.

"Boston’s greatest weakness throughout" was the absence of an arable hinterland that could provide the town with a steady supply of agricultural surpluses for trade. Massachusetts was a land of small, self-sufficient farmers, many of whom were unable to grow surpluses because of the poor soil and primitive transportation facilities in the interior. The lack of nearby grain reserves, and two major colonial wars, hurt the Bay Colony more than the other seaport towns. For example, the British-Spanish War of 1739 cut off Boston fish merchants from important Spanish markets, thus generating a capital loss that prevented them from purchasing European goods. The war stimulated a rise in trade for the cereal-exporting colonies south of Boston. Their great profits meant they no longer had to go to Boston to buy European goods because they could purchase directly.

Massachusetts became the major recruitment area for the colonial wars. In the short term this proved beneficial, since many landless young men volunteered for the bounty that would give them the beginnings of a nest egg for the purchase of a farm. Many never returned, however, thus generating a need for poor relief for a large group of widows and orphans. Besides disrupting trade, these wars caused increased taxation and inflation. Governor Joseph Dudley wrote of the huge war costs to the British Board of Trade in 1712. He noted the plight of the populace as "much impoverished and enfeebled by the heavy and almost insupportable charge of a long and calamitous war which has chiefly lyen [sic] upon this Province." Boston Town Meeting sent a memorial to the General Court in 1746 asking for a reduction in taxes because King George’s War had almost destroyed the town’s maritime trade, its fisheries, and its distilleries. A letter to a Boston newspaper in 1747 complained: "It is very melancholy to hear everywhere People’s Complaints of the Distresses and Discouragements they
labor under from the Depreciation of our Currency, and the exorbitant publick Debt." Several more times, in February, May, and November of 1747, the selectmen complained of the costs brought on by recent wars.

War also brought on severe inflation. Importation of hard specie declined because of "Queen Anne’s War" (1702–1713), forcing the General Court to issue paper notes. Throughout the century, British mercantilism and the demand for English goods led to a scarcity of specie, the issuing of inflated paper currency, and constant fiscal turmoil. The real wages of laborers on the lower levels of society decreased in value, creating what one historian called "a new class of dependent poor." While the economy picked up between 1720 and 1740 because of the prosperity of shipbuilding, fisheries, and construction, property values stagnated, per capita imports and exports declined, and poor relief increased. A town committee petitioned the provincial government for a reduction in taxes in 1743 because of declines in revenues and the higher costs of food and fuel, which created hardships for the poor. "Had it not been for the extended Charity of Able and well disposed Persons amongst Us, a great many must have Suffered exceedingly, and some did Notwithstanding all the Care to prevent it." By the 1740s three distinct economic groups emerged in the population: a large segment of propertyless men, a sizable number of varied shopkeepers, craftsman, artisans, and laborers with meager real estate holdings, and a small but well-defined group of men with major commercial investments living in sumptuous houses amid conspicuous displays of wealth.

Serious health crises created widespread labor shortages, and a decline in the town’s population. Major epidemics occurred in 1721–22, 1730, and 1735–37. Primitive sanitation and the failure to control contagion caused over two thousand deaths. For the first time, burials outnumbered births in 1735. Hysteria spread and resulted in widespread avoidance of the town by ships and farmers. Many artisans and mariners fled to other towns, increasing the scarcity of labor. As the largest port until the 1740s, Boston suffered from both mercantilist customs regulations, which stifled trade, and from the press gangs of British men-of-war. British captains liked the town’s proximity both to the Caribbean and to French Canada and used Boston as a port for refitting and replenishing crews that had deserted. Impressment led many shippers and captains to avoid the dangers of Boston, increasing its economic malaise. Because of their lower costs, nearby ports of Marblehead, Salem, and Gloucester attracted shipbuild-
ing and fishing commerce that heretofore had gone to Boston. None of these factors had any serious impact upon New York or Philadelphia.

While Boston was infamous for rioting, resistance to customs regulations, and a predilection for smuggling, Philadelphians prided themselves on a contrary image. Comparing the two towns in midcentury, Governor John Penn wrote the Earl of Hillsborough, secretary of state for America, that unlike Boston, under his jurisdiction “none of the Officers of His Majesty’s Customs in the ports within my Government, have, as yet, received the least interruption in the discharge of their duty.” Perhaps residents of Philadelphia and New York abstained from rioting because their prosperous economies meant they had fewer resentments against local and British authorities.

A colonial historian studied the economies of the three seaports and found that Boston compared unfavorably with the two other communities. An ongoing monetary inflation afflicted Boston, which was especially hard on the poor. Neither New York nor Philadelphia suffered from these inflationary woes. These two cities had productive agricultural hinterlands that provided continued surpluses that were processed in the urban centers, thus affording work for many before the exportation of these surpluses. Because they were far from French Canada, they did not have to provide large sums for military expeditions, nor did they have to supply manpower. In fact, the wars of the midcentury increased trade, shipbuilding, and artisanry. An intensified demand for foodstuffs in the West Indies was a boon for colonies that produced surpluses. Moreover, both New York and Philadelphia attracted large numbers of new immigrants, whose presence stimulated a construction boom. Boston’s weak economy meant few jobs were available. Finally, Boston’s expenses for poor relief far exceeded those of the other towns.

Although like Boston, both cities had an entrenched oligarchy, their ruling classes were sensitive to the popular will and more accessible to their communities. Depressions occurred in New York and Philadelphia in the first decade of the century, during the late 1740s, and in the early 1780s. Yet, these economic derangements did not stimulate any sort of mobilization by the lower classes. The resurgence of economic growth and an informal artisanal system allowed for a “dynamic social structure in which many of the relationships that might have created class cultures were in considerable flux,” argued a historian. This “fluidity of socioeconomic relations” led to fewer riots, and to the general “dispersion” of the population.
A Philadelphia historian rhapsodized about the “peace and order” of this eighteenth-century city, due in large part to the “informal structure of its community.” Here, density of population meant there was plentiful work, which led to beneficial economic interactions among all classes. The poor and the rich thrived together and were in constant communication with each other. This daily fruitful exchange smoothed class antagonisms and bred a sense of community. This does not mean that the rich were not all powerful. They were, with about 500 men controlling the town’s economy. Nonetheless, there was plenty of work, no controlling craft guilds, and opportunities for the most marginal worker to become a small entrepreneur. “Philadelphia on the eve of the Revolution was a town of freedom and abundance for the common man.”

In contrast, pre-Revolutionary Boston was a place of economic decline for large numbers of the common people, while a few merchants became ostentatiously wealthy. This blatant economic disparity led to “insecurity” as the “prevailing condition affecting almost all people in one way or another.” Another issue germane to the causes of collective violence is whether people had political input in their communities, or whether they were largely powerless.

Political Powerlessness and Rioting

Not yet resolved is the controversy over the extent of participatory democracy in pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts. Presumably, legal input in decision making should vitiate the need to indulge in extralegal tumults. Popular expression of the public will in a democracy provides an outlet for discontent and promotes community stability. The prevailing notion that eighteenth-century Massachusetts was a “middle-class democracy” raises a dilemma about why certain groups in the population found it necessary to riot, when they had adequate outlets to political power. Others question the extent of this political enfranchisement. They argue against the notion of a widespread democracy, especially in Boston. The argument revolves around restrictions to voting.

In Puritan Massachusetts (1630–1684) church members voted, as did “freemen” with a taxable estate of eighty pounds. By 1687 only twenty-four men had enough property to vote, but over four hundred held the designation of church members. In 1690, the authorities extended the right of freemanship to all those paying taxes of at least four shillings, or holding houses or land in the value of six pounds. The new British charter of 1692 abolished religion as a criterion for
the franchise. To vote for the legislature, one had to have “an estate of Freehold in Land . . . to the value of forty shillings per annum at the least, or other estate to the value of Forty pounds sterling.” To vote for town meeting, the Township Act of 1692 required voters to have a taxable estate worth twenty pounds, in addition to paying a poll tax. From a total population of 6,700 by 1700, only 350 could vote in the Boston town meeting, out of an eligible male population of some 3,000. This number was about the same as those who had voted before under the old charter. 18

Since Massachusetts was a colony of small landholders, it is probably true that many met the freehold requirements and could vote. Additionally, it appears that in many areas, Boston town meeting was quite lax about who was present and who voted. Nonetheless, a substantial number of Bostonians were poor tenants who did not own sufficient property to count as freeholders. One historian estimated that by 1760, with 3,750 white adult males eligible to vote in a population of 15,000, only 1,500 could meet the financial requirements to vote in town meeting. Sailors, apprentices, low-level artisans, laborers, and indentured servants—the laboring poor—could not vote. 19

A better indication of the disposition of political power is not voter eligibility, but how many people actually voted. In the early 1730s, for example, 650 or .04 percent of Boston’s 15,000 people voted. While the population rose in the 1740s, thereafter it rapidly declined to just over 15,000 by 1763. In that year, 1,089 or .07 percent of the population voted, a sign of slightly increased participation by eligible voters. Although there was a widening of the electorate, the actual number voting in comparison to the total population still was quite small. 20

One historian, in trying to point out that there was more interest in local elections than in provincial ones, inadvertently demonstrated serious voter apathy. For example, in 1734 (population ca. 15,500), 916 voted in the Boston contest, while 604 voted for the legislature. A similar low vote occurred in 1736 (population ca. 16,000) when it was 676 versus 266. Throughout the century, voter turnout averaged around 21 percent of the eligible voters. 21 Many empowered to vote apparently chose not to exercise their privilege. In the 1700s a widely held belief that voting was meaningless invariably led to voter apathy.

Most common people were dependent upon a maritime elite for their economic life, and thus dared not openly question merchant leadership by voting openly against their wishes. Maritime historian Samuel Eliot Morison observed that economic inequality affected the democratic process in seaport towns such
as Boston and Marblehead: “Few town meetings have been held near tidewater where the voice of shipowner, merchant, or master mariner did not carry more weight than that of fisherman, counting-room clerk, or common seaman.” A colonial historian indicated that as early as the 1690s, the merchants began to loom large as power brokers. “The merchant’s importance as suppliers, middlemen and employers was sufficient to create both grudging respect and lingering fear.” By 1770, “an integrated economic and political hierarchy based on mercantile wealth had emerged in Boston.” Those who were economic dependents with limited assets had to pay deference to the well off, notably the rich merchants of the town.22

Throughout the century, a small coterie of these mercantile elites controlled most governmental offices, both locally and in the General Court (or General Assembly).23 Between 1740 and 1760, Boston elite merchants were speakers of the House three out of every four years. From 1700 to 1774, over half the Boston selectmen and representatives were merchants or in commerce. The wealthiest owned most of the property and dominated the community. An analysis of House leadership between 1740 and 1755 pointed out: “First the House recruited its leadership from a small, readily identifiable group of men. And second, inherited social prestige, judicial office, and a connection with the province’s merchant community were viable symbols for identifying those men entitled to legislative deference.”24 One commentator suggested that before the Revolution, Boston was an “intensely unequal society” with the wealthy dominating the government.25

Excluded from all voting was the lower rung of propertyless urban males—mariners, less skilled artisans and craftsmen, journeymen and apprentices, petty merchants (such as cobblers), common laborers, indentured servants, and slaves. Ignored by historians in the debate over the franchise were adult women, males under twenty-one, and teenagers of both sexes, who frequently made up a significant portion of urban rioters. For example, in 1707 in Boston, whose citizens were “inclined to Riots and Tumults,” angry women emptied chamber pots on colonial troops returning from an abortive Canadian expedition. Observing a customs riot in 1768, Governor Francis Bernard described the participants as “the assembling of a great number of people of all kinds sexes and ages, many of which showed a disposition to the utmost disorder.”26

Even though a considerable number of eighteenth-century Boston’s adult male freeholders could vote, and Massachusetts had the broadest democracy in
the world at that time, shut off from any form of political expression were a majority of the population of men, women, and teens. From time to time the politically dispossessed of both sexes, like their brethren in England and France, made claims upon their ruling elites. When denied their demands, they often took matters into their own hands. English historian E. P. Thompson made the same assessment of the European powerless: “The poor knew the one way to make the rich yield was to twist their arms.” Violence became the plebeians’ means of political expression.

Limitation of the franchise was a common situation in the colonies and in Great Britain, and therefore does not differentiate Boston from the other seaport towns. One historian describes 1770 Philadelphia as a place where 10 percent owned 89 percent of the property, less than 20 percent owned their homes, and 500 men “guided the town’s economic life.” Of New York, another historian suggests the franchise was “rather generously bestowed.” Yet, in 1733, only 33 percent of those eligible voted.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to prove conclusively that disgruntled Bostonians chose violence to express their grievous economic conditions or their lack of political power. There are multiple reasons for rioting, as described earlier, but when the individual loses his/her inhibitions and shares similar passions with others, the crowd forms. Moods and attitudes must be contagious, and affect people with the same predisposition. These feelings can readily spread in a densely populated setting, where instant communication is feasible. More than a psychological mind-set is the prevailing generalized belief commonly held by the group that the only recourse to eminent danger is to strike out against this threat. The actions of the crowd are a blend of complex motives and beliefs affected by both economic conditions and shared ideas. In Boston, the town’s unique geography was the perfect setting for the formation of crowds bent upon direct action.

Geography and Rioting

Described in 1750 as a “diamond-shaped quadrilateral,” Boston was a peninsula surrounded by water, tied to the mainland village of Roxbury by a narrow, uninhabited neck. Less than a thousand acres, it was about two and three-quarters miles broad from north to south, and about a mile and a half wide at its largest place, east to west. The majority of the population was packed into
the North and South Ends until after 1802, when the major fill-ins began. In 1741, 61 percent of the population lived in the small North End and the center. The South and West Ends took up two-thirds of the land area. The West End was largely unpopulated, with three major hills and a common. Not much changed in Boston’s ecological situation throughout the eighteenth century.

In 1719, an English traveler observed: “a considerable part of the Peninsula upon which the Town stands, is not yet built upon.” The 1722 map of John Bonner showed a densely populated central area connected to a populous North End, and a somewhat less populous South End. The West End was still virtually empty of buildings. The Bonner map of 1769, a Revolutionary map of 1774, the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* map of 1775, the Henry Pelham map of 1777, and the Carleton map of 1803 are identical in showing a cramped maritime community, narrowly confined on the eastern shore upon a tiny spit of land. Within this dense urban concentration was a sizable number of estranged poor people.30

Various motives bring people together for common action, such as a shared belief or interest, the experience of a “structural strain,” or commonly held predispositions. The link that forms the crowd are the “ecological factors” that provide for easy communication and for processing of information.31 A place of extreme density, with physical barriers to outsiders and outside communication, makes it easy for like-minded people to assemble and carry out a common purpose. A British historian contends that rioting was not a major factor in England between 1660 and 1714 because of its largely rural condition. “The main reason for the comparative peace of the country was the scattered nature of the population. Where it was concentrated, even in small manufacturing or market towns or in seaports, it was likely to be turbulent enough.”32

Unlike spacious New York, Philadelphia also had a densely packed population living in overcrowded living conditions. However, its generalized prosperity based upon its “open society and economy” militated against a milieu of lower-class dissatisfaction. It was a “town of freedom and abundance for the common man,” so its inhabitants did not resort to violence as often as Boston’s residents.33 Boston’s singular geography provided the necessary propinquity for a disaffected population to gather to espouse their economic and social needs in the form of rioting.