For three days in November 1747, rioters controlled the town of Boston and paralyzed the provincial government. Unlawful violence occurred over an issue that severely affected the lower classes. The brazen actions of the British navy, the forcible impressment of men into naval service, led to a classic violent confrontation between the ruling classes and the common people. While impressment had a negative affect on trade and hurt Boston’s merchant elite, it was the laboring classes who had the most to lose. They were the ones to strike out to protect their traditional prerogative—freedom from impressment. A Boston historian wrote in 1836: “The lower class were the especially aggrieved, because it was upon them the depredation was made.” Colonial New England’s views on impressment did not agree with official British policy.

For two months in the fall of 1747, a British naval squadron under Commo-
The Impressment Riot of 1747 • 53

dore Charles Knowles lay at anchor in Boston Harbor for refitting and replenishing its stores for a journey to the West Indies. During this time, many sailors deserted from these vessels. Either they sought to escape the undeniable hardships they faced as British seamen, or they desired the better pay and conditions to be found on board a Boston merchant vessel. Boston’s merchants openly encouraged mass desertions. Casualties from the recent siege of French-held Louisbourg in 1745 further depleted the ranks. Knowles needed to make up for these losses before sailing. On November 16, he ordered his men to raid the ships in the harbor and scour the waterfront to “impress” into His Majesty’s service all whom they encountered.²

On a quiet evening in November 1747, a group of armed officers and seamen descended from their ships into longboats and pushed off stealthfully into Boston Harbor in search of their quarry. They were on the lookout for men to impress into the Royal navy. The hated press gang would virtually kidnap innocent civilians and put them to work as sailors on a British man-of-war. Life on board such a warship was dangerous and harsh. Few volunteered, and many deserted. That November evening one press gang chased a small boat carrying some Boston carpenters and laborers on their way to a job. Once caught, the Bostonians informed the press officer that as citizens of the province of Massachusetts, the law exempted them from impressment. Denying their claims and treating them quite roughly, the British officer forced them into his boat as prisoners. Another press gang boarded a vessel that had a crew of nineteen. The ship’s captain argued that since his vessel was outward-bound, the British had no authority to impress his crew. Again, the press officer ignored this explanation and took sixteen sailors, leaving the ship dangerously undermanned. The press gang rounded up forty-six shocked men by the next afternoon.

Law and tradition dictated that naval officers get permission to press through a warrant issued from the provincial governor. Knowles ignored this practice and also violated laws against taking Boston or Massachusetts men and those on outward bound ships. The next day, on November 17, the lower orders of Boston, responding to what they considered an illegal press, collected as a “Mob, or rather a body of Men arose, I believe with no other Motive, than barely to rescue if possible their Captivated Fr[ien]ds,” wrote Bostonian Samuel P. Savage.³ To force the return of the captured men, lower-class Bostonians began taking British officers and seamen as hostages. The riot had begun.
The Background of Impressment

Impressment—the forcible recruitment of British men into the Royal navy—was a time-honored, legal practice that was in existence before the Magna Carta was approved in 1215. Supplying men for the fleet, chiefly in wartime, required some form of conscription. Impressment was initially applied only to seamen, but over time, anyone on shipboard or in seaports was ripe for the press gang. Englishmen anywhere on the globe were subject, but there were exceptions: all landsmen except “harvesters” (which meant large numbers of those working the land), “gentlemen,” apprentices (those tied to masters), ship’s officers and boatswains, and varied skilled artisans (e.g., carpenters of merchant vessels over fifty tons, and only when on their vessels). This meant that it was largely the urban lower orders—sailors, simple craftspersons, and the wide variety of common laborers of the seaports—who were the targets of the press gang.

Impressment in harbors was legal only from inward-bound ships. The pressing of men from outward-bound ships would destroy trade at the port, and that was adverse to the interests of mercantile Britain. The Admiralty usually issued press warrants to captains, but the civilian authorities had to agree. In 1696, an order of the British Privy Council required royal governors to be the sole agents to dispense press warrants in American seas. (Knowles had not received permission to press.) Because of deteriorating conditions in the British navy by the seventeenth century, impressment became the major means to man vessels. The wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries stimulated more desertions, especially in the colonies. As English historian E. P. Thompson noted: “No institution was as much hated in the 18th century, as the press gang.”

Problems over the legality of impressment arose in the American colonies, where special circumstances often generated distinct and different precedents. British captains, often very far from home and facing difficult circumstances, either started presses without permission from the civil authorities, or they bent the rules. The notion of an illegal press became justification for locals to resist the press gangs.

During a press in Boston in 1693, the press gang pulled from their beds two members of the House of Representatives. The colonial governor had the captain arrested for an illegal press and sent him to England in irons. In 1702, one Captain Jackson of H.M.S. Swift impressed men from Boston Harbor and from
the streets without permission. In that same year, Massachusetts's Lt. Gov. Thomas Povey actually ordered the firing of cannon on a man-of-war that was pressing without obtaining a legal warrant. Two ships had their entire crews impressed, leaving them unattended—another violation. One ship burned because a cook was taken before he could put out his fires. Matters came to a head during Queen Anne's War (1702-1713) against France and Spain. To avoid the man-hungry British navy, colonists curtailed trade with the British and went to the Dutch and Danes instead. In this instance, impressment hampered the mercantile policies of England, besides giving rise to numerous colonial complaints.

To maintain colonial trade and good relations, Parliament passed the “Sixth of Anne” Act of 1708 “for the Encouragement of Trade to America.” This law prohibited all impressment of seamen from ship or shore in the American colonies. This forthright statute was to become fraught with ambiguities. With the end of the war in 1713, a debate arose over whether the law was perpetual or a short-term wartime expedient. All agreed that captains could not impress on their own initiative. However, in 1716, the British attorney general maintained that the act was temporary and that royal governors now had authority to issue press warrants. In 1723, the Admiralty unilaterally accepted this interpretation and allowed captains to press in American waters with the compliance of governors. A divided Parliament did nothing to dispel the controversy.

Impressment reemerged as an issue in 1739, with hostilities against the Spanish (the “War of Jenkins’ Ear”), and then with the 1744-1748 War of Austrian Succession (“King George’s War” in the colonies) against the French and Spanish. Commanders desperately needed men for their ships. New Englanders took the contrary position that impressment violated a still standing statute. British commanders began pressing, and created special problems in the West Indies. Impressment there created food shortages and put an end to the all-important sugar trade. Parliament took a position on the issue in June 1746 by declaring the West Indies exempt from impressment “for the better Encouragement of the Trade of His Majesty’s Sugar Colonies in America.”

The passage of this law generated complications in North America. Some colonials feared that this act jeopardized their rights to freedom from impressment. Others stubbornly maintained that the West Indies exemption was an addition to that privilege already held by North America. The British judiciary never decided the matter. This meant that those for and against impressment
in American waters were able to justify the legality of their position. Finally, in 1775, Parliament repealed the Queen Anne act, proving the correctness of the colonists' interpretation of the impressment statute.

**Boston and Impressment Conflicts**

Impressment could have disastrous economic repercussions for Boston. As a seaport with no agricultural base, it was dependent on water carriers from other colonies for much of its food and fuel. Even nearby farm communities brought in their goods in small boats. When the press gangs appeared, the local coasters that supplied necessities avoided entering Boston Harbor for fear of losing their men. In 1741, several Boston merchants complained that impressment by the captain of H.M.S. *Portland* "greatly Terrifies the Coasters and other Vessels bringing Grain, Wood & C to this Town." Laborers and tradesmen feared going out in the streets to ply their trades, and sailors fled the town, causing a severe labor shortage for vessels. The scarcity of mariners meant merchants had to pay higher wages, which squeezed profits. Captains complained that a press made short-handed ships uncontrollable in rough weather. Several ships sank for lack of crews. Trading vessels of all types avoided ports where press gangs operated.

All classes in Boston resented the economic dislocations caused by continued impressment. Decrying the detrimental economic impact of impressment, the province’s upper chamber, the Council, petitioned the House on March 26, 1741, to set up a joint committee to ease the suffering done to “Coasters, Fishermen, Woodcarriers, and others, being interrupted and hindered from bringing Supplies as heretofore, of which there seems to be Danger also for the future, unless some remedy be provided for the Prevention thereof.” On March 11, 1746, Boston town meeting sent to the House a memorial against impressment that lamented “the once cherished now depressed, once flourishing, now sinking Town of Boston.” Besides diminishing trade in Boston, impressment there enabled Boston’s competitors in the southern colonies to take advantage of the situation. Boston’s main rivals, New York and Philadelphia, were not targeted as frequently for press gang actions, and they thrived because of this fact. Curtailment of normal trade meant losses for merchants, unemployment for the have-nots, and general economic decline for all.

In the 1740s, Boston was still the major port of North America because its
unique geographical position marked it as the closest harbor to Europe and Canada. It also enjoyed an extensive trade with the West Indies. This proximity exaggerated its importance to the British navy as a strategic center in the wars against France. It was from Boston and other locations in Massachusetts that major expeditions were to be launched against the French. These expeditions required money and men. The other major seaports benefited from their distance from wartime locales. New York had only one urban riot connected to impressment, in 1764. Philadelphia had none during the eighteenth century. Costly wars, inflation, and impressment resulted in Boston's economic decline, beginning in the late 1730s and lasting through the 1740s. In the 1750s, prosperous and stable Philadelphia became the premier port in the colonies.

The fading of Boston's prosperity took place in the highly charged atmosphere of impressment. British captains continued to press, with or without legal warrants. Often they acted because they were in dire need of men. When ice forced a squadron commander to put his ships into port alongside a wharf, he complained: "it is not in the power of man to prevent . . . seamen from running away. Not one of his Majesty's ships who are stationed at any of the trading ports in North America would ever be able to proceed on service after laying up for one winter if they did not impress." Royal governors usually sided with the Admiralty over the legality of pressing. They understood the predicament of naval officers, but they wanted press gangs to follow "legal" procedures and avoid local entanglements. Nonetheless, impressment generated wholesale hostility to the British navy and toward the local authorities who furnished the press warrants.

An example of what the authorities considered a legal press took place in 1739 to assist the H.M.S. *Tartar*. "His Majesty's Ship the *Tartar* lyes below, and continues impressing of Sea-Men from Vessels inward bound, in order to compleat their Number of Hands; having left England in such Haste as that she was very poorly Man'd when she came hither." A typical press warrant, granted June 12, 1740, by Massachusetts Governor Jonathan Belcher to Captain Francis Percival of the *Astrea* read: "That his Excellency issue a warrant to Edward Winslow, Esq, Sheriff of the County of Suffolk, to impress twenty seamen, not being inhabitants of this province, nor belonging to any outward-bound vessel, fishing-vessel, or coaster, for the recruit of His Majesty's Ship, the 'Astrea.'" Thus, a county official carried out the press for the navy. He was enjoined from taking inhabitants of Massachusetts, men on vessels leaving the port of Boston,
or mariners working on local ships or boats that provided for the provisioning of the town.

Relief was apparent when the Astrea left in August. “By the Departure of the last mention’d Ship, the Navigation is again open and free to this Port, and the Seamen delivered from the Danger of an Impress,” wrote a Boston newspaper. Although impressment badly affected their marginal standard of living, the poor anguished more over the loss of legal rights. They believed the Queen Anne act of 1708 freed them from compulsory service in the British navy. Those awarded the privilege of exemption from the press gang would not easily abide the erosion of this right. Considerably heightening the animosity of the lower orders was another series of contentious impressment incidents.

The Astrea returned in the spring of 1741 with a new commander. A harsh disciplinarian, Captain James Scott brought with him the rumor of impending impressment. Conditions on board the Astrea were intolerable, for over fifty men deserted. Sailors were willing to take hazardous chances. A Boston newspaper reported: A “sailor belonging to His Majesty’s Ship Astrea, attempting to swim from Said Ship in order to make his Escape, was drowned.” Tensions mounted as rumors spread that Scott had applied for a press warrant.

On the evening of June 8, 1741, workers on the town’s famous Long Wharf watched the Astrea launching a longboat. When the boat approached the wharf, “the looser People ran down upon the Wharf with clubs and Sticks in their hands and forbid their Landing,” wrote eyewitness merchant Thomas Paine. After forcing the boat away, the crowd marched to a house on King Street where Captain Scott lodged. Scott reported to the Council the next day “that a great number of people to the amount of Three Hundred at least armed with axes, cutlasses, and clubs, beset his lodgings yesterday evening at about nine of the Clock threatening to kill him.” Paine disputed the size of the crowd and whether they were actually armed. Whatever the truth, a crowd had formed and threatened would-be impressers.

Desertions continued. On June 13, in daylight, seven sailors fled the Astrea in a longboat, “in Face of the Whole crew. . . . and so made their escape.” Though fired upon with cannon from another ship, they reached shore and disappeared into the town. An agitated Captain Scott petitioned Belcher for assistance, contending that Boston’s merchants encouraged these desertions. This charge was particularly true for Boston, where its merchants were well known for luring sailors with higher pay and “as many pounds of Sugar, Gallons of
Rum and pounds of Tobacco as pounds in Money." It appears that no ship could refit or take on stores in Boston, said one captain, without "the loss of all her men." Belcher aided Scott by issuing him a press warrant.

No information is available about the nature of the press itself, but Scott must have satisfied the governor and the town by taking only men from incoming ships. Nevertheless, this action disrupted trade. When the Astrea left Boston, a local newspaper remarked: "The beginning of last Week the Astrea Mast Ship sail'd for Jamaica with Naval Stores, to the great Joy of this Town, which has suffer'd a great many Thousands of Pounds Damage, by that Interruption given to its Trade and Business, since the arrival of that unlucky Ship in our Harbour." Besides feeling the negative economic results of impressment, actions of local authority figures, as well as the British navy, inflamed the plebeians further against impressment.

While the governor issued press warrants, other provincial officials, notably Edward Winslow, the sheriff of Suffolk County, were responsible for enforcement. Winslow and his deputies worked with press gangs to round up the needed men. He himself participated in several presses. In July 1741 he had petitioned the House for fifty pounds, "that sum being advanced by him to impress Men to serve on Board His Majesty's Ship the Astrea." Late on Friday evening, October 13, 1741, Winslow and a justice of the peace, Anthony Stoddard, came upon a large group of drunken revelers. Typically, it was the lower orders that caroused in the streets. The crowd naturally detested such meddlesome authority figures, whom they connected with impressment. They set upon the two officials and beat them severely. Governor William Shirley, newly appointed, described the riot in a November 2 proclamation. He offered a reward for the apprehension of the culprits:

Whereas upon Friday the Thirteenth of October last, late at Night, a considerable Number of People being assembled in a riotous manner in King Street, in Boston and committing great Disorders; Anthony Stoddard, Esq; Member of His Majesty's Council, and one of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace, and Edward Winslow, Esq; Sheriff of the County of Suffolk, being in the Execution of their respective Offices, for suppressing the said riotous and tumultuous Disorders, were treated with great Violence and Insolence, the said Edward Winslow, while carrying one of the Ring-Leaders in the said Tumult to the Goal of the County,
being by some unknown Person or Persons Knock'd down and wounded in the Face; and the said Anthony Stoddard violently assaulted and having great stones thrown at him while he was in the Street, whereby his Life was endangered: All of which is a high Insult upon the Authority of His Majesty's Government of this Province, and a notorious Breach of the Peace; and the Actors and Abettors thereto ought to be prosecuted with the utmost Severity of the Law.17

The two badly mauled law officers, who were the tools of both the hated press gang and the town's elites, foolishly interrupted the festivities of Boston's common laborers and mechanics at a very dangerous moment. The working classes took the opportunity to vent their pent-up feelings, in action that was probably quite therapeutic. The two officers interfered with their revels, but were also symbols of their anger against impressment. Continued infringements upon their customary privileges would keep fresh the lower class's chronic distrust of elites. Anxiety increased the following spring when Captain Scott and the Astrea returned to Boston to once again impress seamen.

Captain Scott received no reply when he asked Governor Shirley for a press warrant on March 13, 1742. Shirley was evasive because he was trying to cope with several political issues at once. One related to the war against France and his desire to raise a local expedition against Canada. This meant he needed money and support from the legislature, which opposed impressment. He also faced problems over taxes and the currency, and a depression in Boston. Above all, he wanted to avoid actions that would strengthen his political adversaries.18

On March 17, without a warrant, the impatient Scott sent out a press gang to comb the harbor for men. They impressed eight men, including the captain of a coaster, a master carpenter, a fisherman, two sailors, a laborer, a servant, and an Indian. Furious, the governor accused the captain of acting illegally because he had taken Massachusetts men in violation of an act of Parliament. He told Scott that warrants would be forthcoming, and to take sailors from incoming ships only, with no pressing of Massachusetts people. Scott refused to release the men until Shirley provided him with fifty others to make up for those lost. “As to my doing or not doing my duty,” he said, “I am answerable to the Lords of Admiralty and to my Admiral.” To free the men, the Council passed a resolution ordering the cannon of Castle William fired at the Astrea. Shirley remonstrated with Scott, writing that the captain had put “the Inhabitants of
this place . . . in great Terror," and these actions had virtually closed the trade
"upon which the Inhabitants of the Town depend for their constant Supplies
for the Support of Life." Scott relented, and Shirley won the day. He gave Scott
the sought after warrants, and the captain released the impressed men.¹⁹

The governor wished to avoid a repetition of this kind of incident and
lessen the need for impressment. Shirley urged the General Court of Massachu­
setts to pass a law making it illegal for merchants to lure seamen off British
ships:

That the Masters of Merchant Ships, and others in this Province, make
a Practice of enticing away their Seamen, which is the great Cause of
their Desertion, and occasions much Prejudice to His Majesty's Service:
To obviate all such complaints for the Future, I think it would be a point
of Wisdom in this Court to pass an Act for effectually preventing this
evil Practice.

Nonetheless, the lawmakers refused to heed the governor. They charged that
naval officers acted unjustly, and impressment seriously hurt trade and "dis­
tressed the Inhabitants thereof in their Lawful Business, by keeping the neces­
sary Supplies of Provisions and firing out of Town, to the ruin of some
Families." Impressment was to continue because the war with France necessi­
tated full complements of men onboard ship. Shirley continued to issue press
warrants, even though the House and Boston town meeting denounced these
"most arbitrary and illegal proceedings."²⁰ Two more notable impressment epi­
sodes in 1745 and 1746 kept the flames of anger burning in the hearts of Boston's
working poor.

A disastrous impressment fiasco in November 1745 was a cause célèbre that
would become the rallying cry for the rioters of 1747. In this instance, the press
gang and a deputy sheriff not only exceeded their instructions, they brutally
killed sailors who should have been exempt from impressment because they
were local heroes. During the war with France, Massachusetts men had partici­
pated in an attack on French Canada in June 1745 that secured Louisbourg, the
important fortress on Cape Breton Island. These men had come home as he­
roes, holding a special place of esteem in the community. Among those men
were the sailors who were killed in the impressment fiasco.

In November 1745, the captain of H.M.S. Wager applied for press warrants
from the governor's office. The press warrant issued by Lt. Gov. Spencer Phips on November 20, 1745, gave Deputy Sheriff Nathaniel Hasey specific instructions to take with him "a Number of Discreet Men Inhabitants of this Province and NO Others." This admonition was to make sure that the press gang would be sensitive and knowledgeable about excluding Massachusetts men. Moreover, the warrant expressly forbade the impressment of "any of the men that had been in the Late Expedition [Louisbourg]." For whatever reason, Hasey disobeyed the orders. Not only did he exclusively use officers and seamen from the Wager to press, but he also captured Massachusetts sailors who had fought at Louis­bourg.²¹

Hasey directed the press gang to the shore quarters of one Captain Cowley, where they burst in and "behaved like Fiends of Hell, brandishing their Swords, beat and abused Capt. Cowley . . . and carried away five Sailors belonging to Capt. Cowley's Ship." Hasey's motives remain a mystery. Whether bribed, carrying out a personal vendetta, or simply doing his best, he violated the tradition of pressing men from incoming ships only. Matters worsened when the deputy sheriff then led his gang to the North End. They broke into a home quartering three sailors off the local coaster, the sloop Resolution. The sailors, besides being locals, were veterans of the Louisbourg expedition. They resisted impressment by barricading themselves in an upstairs room. Just then the captain of the Resolution appeared. He informed the press gang that these sailors were exempt on three counts—they shipped on a coaster, they were provincials, and they were heroes of Louisbourg. The press gang seemed to relent. The sailors came down, and their captain left. Suddenly the press gang attacked the sailors:

> the Candles were put out, and (Readers, our Language does not afford Words bad enough for the villains) perfidious and execrable Wretches fell upon the poor unarmed Men with their Cutlasses, and Stab'd and hack'd two of them in so terrible, and inhuman Manner, that one of them died the next Day, and the other the Evening following, but the third had the good Fortune to escape their Rage by hiding himself in a Closet.

The captain of the Resolution returned with reinforcements and captured two members of the fleeing press gang, boatswain John Fowler, and ship's boy John Warren. The affray upset the townspeople of Boston and angered Lt. Gov.
Phips, who proclaimed that “great disorders were committed” and demanded the arrest of the other members of the press gang. The authorities arrested Hasey, but the rest of the press crew had returned to their ship, except for Fowler and Warren. The Wager quickly sailed away carrying off the “murderers,” to the chagrin of Bostonians.22

Boston town meeting members went on record condemning this action. They petitioned the House, complaining against the governor and his council for issuing press warrants. They charged them with the “breach of Magna Carta,” the “Province Charter,” and an “Act of Parliament.” One year later, they again complained about impressment “by a lawless Rabble . . . which was closed in the inhumane murder of two brave men who had been employed in the hottest Service during the Expedition.”23 Although opposition to the Wager affair unified public opinion against impressment, it was the lower classes who suffered most from the horrors of this system. They were the ones who were impressed. Those killed came from their ranks. Local sheriffs had participated in these heinous acts. The following spring, a Boston jury found the two captured press gang members, Fowler and Warren, guilty of murder, and sentenced them to death by hanging. The Crown, in conjunction with the provincial authorities, interceded with a stay of execution. The unknown fate of the two men was now left “to the pleasure of the King,” which denied justice to the lower orders.24

There is no record remaining from 1746 to show how the common people felt about this unfairness. The lower orders of laborers and artisans fought bravely at Louisbourg and returned to Boston amidst a depression. They suffered from the scarcity of material goods, and the fear and insult generated by the press gang. This was a time when Boston was “the New England center of mass indebtedness, widowhood, and poverty.”25 When an illegal press gang and a local sheriff murdered their brethren, equity was not forthcoming from the authorities. It would be simply a matter of time before the working people lost patience and felt that they had no other recourse but collective violence.

The Wager debacle troubled Governor Shirley. Impressment was a sensitive issue that had serious economic consequences for the port of Boston. Shirley endeavored to do something about the problem. He informed the naval commander of Louisbourg, Sir Peter Warren, that impressment caused a serious economic predicament for Boston. Acceding to Shirley’s request, Admiral Warren issued an order to all commanders “that you do not upon any Account whatsoever, impress out of Coasting or Fishing Vessels, nor any Men who are
or have been employ'd in this Expedition; and for the People's better Knowing these my directions in their Favour, and your Intention to comply with them you are to Cause them to be made Publick." This public proclamation should have lessened the prevailing tensions that existed over impressment. Nevertheless, impressment became an even more common means for staffing ships.

The British naval squadron at Louisbourg was losing large numbers of men who deserted to New England ships that made port there. One commander complained to Shirley that merchant captains were enticing his crews away through "vile behaviour." Thus, while Shirley tried to dampen the use of impressment, colonial merchants were stealing crews from British commanders. Wholesale desertions caused by colonials hardened the will of British captains to press. One such undertaking led to a riot.

Little information exists about the impressment riot of February 1746, for it was a small, short-lived affair. H.M.S. Shirley had been plying the waters off Boston for five months in 1745-46, impressing a total of ninety-two men from incoming vessels. The ship's presence drove off trade and needed fuel and supplies to the town, causing hardships for the poor. The ship entered Boston Harbor, and in February, Captain John Rowse landed to fetch a press warrant for thirty men. Word of a press quickly spread through the community. With warrant in hand, and accompanied by a deputy sheriff, Captain Rowse approached Milk Street, where a crowd waited for him. A large contingent of Boston and Roxbury men, joined by the crew of a New York privateer, ambushed the captain and his companion. These working men and mariners "did in a violent and riotous manner assault the said Capt. Rowse, as also one Mr. William Bowen, Deputy Sheriff of the County of Suffolk (who was then with him) and with their clubs beat and wounded them in the most barbarous manner, so that for some time they lay as dead, being deprived of their senses." Once again, the plebeians used violence to prevent what they believed to be unlawful and unjust action against them. After constant goading, the next major instance of the violation of the people's rights would result in massive resistance.

The Riot

The catalysts for the Knowles impressment riot of November 1747 were the continuing "illegal" actions of British naval commanders and local authorities. These officials trampled upon the laboring poor's exemption from impressment.
After repeated violations of traditional and legal privileges, the lower orders finally burst the bounds of law and order and took matters into their own hands. Without a legal warrant from Governor Shirley, Knowles sent out the press gangs on the evening of the sixteenth and the morning of the seventeenth. One of those impressed, Jonathan Tarbox, later gave a deposition that he and “two or three persons all inhabitants of Boston going in a Boat to Mistick (having their Tools with them) to Caulk a Vessel there—they were chased [sic] by three Boats belonging to Commodore Knowles Squadron.” Tarbox informed the press gang that they were residents of Boston, but the press officer “in a very rough manner answered they did not care for that, for the Commodore had ordered them to Impress all they could meet without distinction, and then accordingly carried off five of the Deponent’s company.”

Compounding the illegality of the press, a press gang captured two apprentice shipwrights who were in a boat picking up some timber for their master. In another instance, the master of a vessel testified the press gang boarded his outward-bound ship and took away sixteen men of a crew of nineteen. Another deposition by one Benjamin Hallowell of Boston gave Knowles credit for announcing to the forty-six impressed men that he would interview them, and return those who “belonged to the town or colonies.” By that time it was too late—the crowd had taken hostages and the riot had begun. 29

Two of the main protagonists of this event were Governor Shirley and Speaker of the House, Thomas Hutchinson. 30 Both men wrote about these events. Shirley left a record of his interpretation of events in letters he wrote to his secretary during the riot, his official proclamations, and later, letters to the Lords of Trade in London. Shirley was an English lawyer from Sussex who had lived for a long time in Boston. His governorship, though not without partisan attacks, was more efficient than most, and he remained generally on good terms with the populace. The major focus of his administration had to do with the war against the French. Shirley worked at accommodation with the House to get the supplies and monies he needed. Another important participant observer was Thomas Hutchinson, who would end his career as governor of the province and a hated Tory. In 1737 Hutchinson became a Boston selectmen and a member of the House, continuing in these dual roles off and on for years. In November 1747 he was also the Speaker of the House. He left his account of these few days in November in his magisterial history of the colony and province.

Between nine and ten on the morning of the seventeenth, Hutchinson ap-
peared at the governor's house with two naval officers. Hutchinson reported that he had observed a "Mob [that] consisted of about three hundred Seamen, all Strangers, (the greatest part Scotch) with Cutlasses and Clubs, and that they had seiz'd and detain'd in their Custody a Lieutenant of the Lark," and another officer. The cause of the riot was the Knowles impressment, and hostage taking was in retaliation. Hutchinson somehow persuaded the crowd to give up their hostages, and he spirited them away for safeguarding at the governor's mansion.31

Hutchinson might have shaded the truth about the makeup of the crowd, since a mob of "strangers" would have exculpated Bostonians from participation in illegal action. It is hard to imagine how the Speaker could protect two officers from a "strange mob" if he was unknown to them. Why would "Scotch" rioters pay heed to Hutchinson and give up their prisoners? Certainly, his dress would signal him as a member of the governing classes, but would that alone explain the deferential action of the crowd? They would act in this manner if there were locals in the crowd who knew his identity and paid deference to the important Hutchinson. Later events were to prove that his account strayed from the truth.

Soon after the affray, Shirley heard from the sheriff that in seeking to free the captured Lark officer, he had arrested two members of the mob. The rioters showed no compunction in attacking the sheriff, who was, according to Shirley "Grievously wounded by 'em, and forc'd to deliver up his two Prisoners, and leave one of his Deputies in their hands, for whose life he assur'd me he was in fear." Hearing this, Shirley ordered out the militia to "suppress the Mob by force, and, if need was, to fire upon 'em with Ball." Without warning, a large crowd appeared in front of Shirley's house, with three naval officers and Commodore Knowles's menial servant as prisoners. Shirley then went out to confront the assemblage and asked what was "the cause of the Tumult." He recorded that an armed man "rudely answered" that it was about "my unjustifiable Impress Warrant." Shirley stood up to the crowd, denying he had issued such a warrant (as he had not), and accused the speaker of being an "Impudent Rascal." At that moment, Shirley's son-in-law, William Bollen, assaulted the speaker by knocking off his hat. Shirley then put himself between the crowd and the hostages, and walked them into the house. Shirley's action in spiriting away the hostages nettled the crowd. Hutchinson, Bollen, and a colonel of the militia tried to calm the crowd. Hutchinson wrote (probably referring to himself) that at this point "persons of discretion inserted themselves and prevailed
The Impressment Riot of IJ47 • 67

so far as to prevent the mob from entering.”32 Stymied, the crowd produced the captured deputy.

The sheriff and his deputies were active participants in impressment. The crowd vented their long-held grievances against the authorities by beating the deputy in Shirley’s courtyard. Then they put him in the stocks—a shameful punishment usually reserved for their own kind. The crowd obviously wanted the governor to witness their actions. To achieve their goal of freeing the impressed, the crowd needed to terrorize the authorities into submission. They could do this only by acting in a public manner. They left soon after without attacking the residence. Shirley called for two regiments of soldiers from Castle William to surround his house to protect Knowles’s men. His next step was to seek support from the legislature.

The General Court (House and Council) met in Boston’s most important building, the Town House, located in the center of town, at the intersection of King and Cornhill (now Washington) Streets. This three-story brick building housed the provincial and town governments, the courts, and a merchant’s exchange. To reach the Assembly, entry was from a side door, one flight up a narrow stairway, and into a hallway that divided the Council and House chambers. Arriving in the afternoon, Shirley discussed with the members the issuing of a proclamation “for dispersing the mob,” with rewards for informants.33

According to Hutchinson, by dusk, “just after candlelight,” a very large armed crowd appeared, numbering “several thousand” (Boston’s population was about 16,000) and surrounded the Town House.34 Shirley described them as “the Mob new increas’d and join’d by some Inhabitants.”35 The rioters now included townspeople, and not just sailors or strangers. Another eyewitness described the crowd as “some Sailors, Strangers, belonging to two or three Vessels bound to Guinea and Privateering” who “attracted some idle Fellows of low Circumstances, and lower Character, Boys and Children, which made the Mob appear large.”36 Mariners from two or three vessels could not account for Hutchinson’s several thousands. The town’s lower orders and their children, as described earlier, made up the crowd. Years later Hutchinson gave up his politic description of the rioters as strangers and identified the lower classes as the protagonists. The press gang

swept the wharfs [sic] also, taking some ship carpenters, apprentices, and labouring land men. However tolerable such a surprize might have
been in London it could not be born here. The people had not been used to it and men of all orders resented it, but the lower class were beyond measure enraged and soon assembled with sticks, clubs, pitchmops & c.37

This collective action by Boston's common people was a typical response of many eighteenth-century violent crowds. They rioted to protect their few traditional rights and privileges from encroachment.

The crowd stormed the Town House to enter the government chambers. They began “by throwing Stones and Brickbatts in at the Windows, and having broke all the Windows of the lower floor, where a few of the Militia Officers were assembled, forcibly enter'd into it, and oblig'd most of the Officers to retire up into the Council Chamber; where the Mob was expected soon to follow 'em up; but prevented by some few of the Officers below, who behav'd better.” Fought off by the defenders on the narrow staircase, a stalled crowd presented an auspicious moment for those inside to begin negotiations. Two “popular” Council members spoke to the crowd. Hutchinson asked Shirley to address the crowd and promise the release of the impressed men. Hutchinson wrote: “the governor in a well judged speech expressed his great disapprobation of the impress and promised his utmost endeavours to obtain the discharge of every one of the inhabitants, and at the same time gently reproved the irregular proceedings.”38

After the governor's speech, one of the leaders of the crowd addressed him. Identified as a townsperson, he referred to the reasons for their collective action. As Shirley noted:

in this Parley one of the Mob, an Inhabitant of the Town call'd upon me to deliver up the Lieutenant of the Lark, which I refus'd to do; after which among other things he demanded of me, why a Boy, one Warren now under Sentence of death in goal for being concern'd in a Press Gang, which kill'd two Sailors in this town in the Act of Impressing, was not Executed; and I acquaint'd 'em his Execution was suspended by his Majesty's order 'till his pleasure shall be known upon it; whereupon the same Person, who was the Mob's Spokesman ask'd me 'if I did not remember Porteous's Case who was hang'd upon a sign post in Edin­burgh.' I told 'em very well, and that I hop'd they remember'd what the Consequence of that proceeding was to the Inhabitants of the City.39
This give and take between Shirley and the crowd spokesperson revealed several important points. The spokesperson of the rioters alluded to the killings caused by the press gang from H.M.S. *Wager* in 1745, and the authorities' failure to punish the guilty. Then he went on to threaten the governor by pointing to another riot that occurred because of the denial of justice to the common people. Reported at length in a local newspaper, this riot was well known to Bostonians.

The Porteous riot of Edinburgh in 1736 was typical of those events where the plebeians, suspicious of the authorities, used rioting to achieve their ends. Two smugglers who had violated the Acts of Trade had been sentenced to death. Smuggling was a popular occupation with workers and merchants, who found Britain’s mercantile system too restrictive. Afraid a milling crowd would rescue the smugglers, a Captain Porteous ordered his men to fire into the assemblage, killing six. Later, found guilty of murder, Porteous received a death sentence. The common people of Edinburgh did not believe that justice would ever occur, and “being apprehensive that a Reprieve was come for him they secured all the City Gates, to prevent the Entry of any Soldier to interrupt them, then set Fire to the Prison Door, and having by that means got Admittance into the Jail, they took out the Captain . . . and hanged him upon a Sign Post.”40 The government responded by a massive show of force, killing and wounding many of the populace. This riot was a perfect example of the crowd exercising violence to ensure their vision of justice.

Like the Edinburgh mob, the enraged Boston crowd believed that justice would not be forthcoming. They pointed to a past riot to justify their present stand. In this situation, the common people of Boston evoked a direct kinship with the Scottish crowd, elucidating how the concept of direct action had migrated successfully across the Atlantic. Should their claims go unheeded, they threatened, similar violence would erupt. Shirley countered with a reminder that the British government had responded to the Porteous riot by sending in troops and massacring many of Edinburgh’s poorer inhabitants.

Joined in conflict were the issues that divided the haves and have-nots. The poor demanded justice, the return of the impressed, and the preservation of their traditional prerogatives. Acting in a customary British fashion, they rioted as a last resort. The Porteous and Boston crowds acted on the same assumptions. The ruling classes demanded the people’s obedience to law and custom. In turn, the crowds expected their rulers to abide by the customs and laws that protected the rights of the plebeians. When this normal reciprocity was not
forthcoming, the lower orders formed into crowds to remind the elites of their obligations. The Boston mob would not disband or follow Shirley's admonitions, choosing instead to uphold what they believed were their legitimate rights.

For whatever reasons, the stalemate at the Town House left the crowd disoriented. They promised to return the next day to find out the fate of the impressed. They left with the notion of burning a nearby half-built British vessel. Later that night, they found a barge instead and took it back to Shirley's house to burn it in his yard. Once again, the crowd enacted a symbolic public ritual to inspire the authorities to heed their wishes. Shirley maintained that with the help of ten armed men, he scared them off before they could proceed.

Hutchinson told a different version. The crowd, "from consideration of the danger of setting the town on fire were diverted and the boat was burnt in a place of less hazard." A crowd made up of townspeople would not want their community endangered by fire. In any event, the crowd dispersed into smaller groups, who began searching for more British seamen. They broke into the naval hospital and into affluent homes they suspected of harboring officers. Shirley began to organize an escape route for those he was protecting. He waited patiently for morning and the arrival of the militia.

On the morning of the second day of the riot, November 18, Hutchinson later testified that a horrified Shirley discovered "the militia refused to appear." The militia, except for the officers, did not appear because either they were members of the crowd, or they sympathized with it. Service in the militia was a requirement for all adult males, including servants, but certain officeholders were excluded. On call for emergencies and war, the militia could keep order in troubled times. There was no other force available. The few elected town constables had little authority. The town watch, a low-paying job, lit the street lamps and reported fires. No large British army was available. For all intents and purposes, the town of Boston, seat of the provincial government of Massachusetts, largest seaport in the colonies, had no functioning government.

Lacking any governmental authority, suspicious that Boston legislators sympathized with the rioters (since they refused to condemn the rioting) and fearing further violence, Shirley fled the town to the sanctuary of Castle William:

And finding Myself without a proper Force for Suppressing this Insurrection, and maintaining the King's Authority in the Town, the Soldiers
of the Militia having neglected and refused to obey my Orders given them by their Officers to appear in Arms, for quelling the tumult, and to keep a Military Watch at Night; and there being Reason to apprehend that the Insurrection was secretly countenanced and encouraged by some ill-minded Inhabitants, and Persons of Influence in the Town; and that the same rebellious Rout would be repeated the Night following; I did not think it consistent with the Honour of his Majesty's Government to remain longer in the Midst of it . . . 'til I can assemble a sufficient Force of the Province Militia from the neighbouring Regiments in the Country to quell the rebellious Tumult. 43

Shirley faced more serious complications. Commodore Knowles informed him by letter that he would bring his ships in close and bombard the town.

Incensed at the hostage taking, and because Shirley had to flee ignominiously to the fort, the hot-headed Knowles decided to punish the rioters. Men present on the deck of Knowles's flagship, H.M.S. Canterbury, gave depositions later affirming his intentions to rake the town with shells. One mariner, James Barnard, Jr., heard Knowles call the gunnery officer to prepare twenty-four guns with shot, saying: "By God I'll now see if the King's government is not as good as a Mob." Another witness, Nathaniel Parker, saw Knowles read a letter informing him of Shirley's flight, "which in great passion he tore in pieces, and with a severe stamp ordered the guns to be got Reddy [sic] to be Loaded." On board was a Boston carpenter, Joseph Ballard, doing some repair work. When he heard about the forthcoming bombardment, he pleaded with Knowles that "the Righteous will suffer with the Wicked." Knowles's response showed he equated the poorer classes with the rioters, and they alone would be the target of his shells. He replied to the hapless carpenter, "the North End people were the Rebels." 44 The densely populated North End of Boston was the home to the most common members of the community. On hearing of Knowles's intention, one Bostonian commented that such an act, "kindled by a Madman, might have occasioned a general Conflagration in a Province." 45 Only the persuasive interjection of Governor Shirley would prevent a major catastrophe.

In Castle William, Shirley pondered how to end this vexatious dilemma. He needed to prevent Knowles from shelling the city and convince him to release the impressed. This he achieved by exchanging a round of letters with
Knowles and even dining aboard the *Canterbury* on November 19. Shirley cooled the commodore down and finally succeeded in getting his promise to release the impressed in return for the freeing of the hostages.

At all costs, Shirley wanted to avoid a bloodbath that might occur if he should bring in the provincial militia. He set about getting the local authorities to come out against the “Tumult,” and let them know “that I desire they would proceed in it,” and use their influence to bring the militia out. He asked his secretary to give the House and Council a copy of his request for the provincials, thereby warning the legislators to make known their loyalty. He persuaded them to cooperate by dangling before them the possibility of wiping the slate clean for the town. If the militia would finally come out, he would not put “a lasting Brand upon the Town” and would “give ’em an opportunity of retrieving their own Honour, and my good Opinion of ’em, and preventing an infamous reproach upon the Duty and Loyalty of the Town.” In a sagacious move, in his November 21 proclamation for “apprehending rioters,” he reversed himself on the predominant role of the “Inhabitants” as rioters. Instead, he lessened the town’s culpability by referring to the rioters as “a great number of Seamen and other lewd and Profligate Persons.”

Both the provincial government and the Boston selectmen were in a quandary as to how to respond to the riot. They did not condone violence, but they were in agreement that impressment was the cause of “the Disorders consequent thereon.” For three days the House and the Council did nothing, “not willing to interpose lest they should encourage other commanders of the navy to future acts of the like nature.” Their inaction lent legitimacy to the rioters and their use of violence. Apprised of the seriousness of the situation by Shirley, they finally acted at the end of the third day. The lawmakers asked House Speaker Hutchinson to draw up resolves that all could agree on, supporting Shirley.

Without hesitation, Hutchinson blamed the riot on the lower orders of “Seamen, Servants, Negroes and others in the Town of Boston.” The resolves reiterated that impressment caused such happenings: “That this House will exert themselves by all Ways and Means possible in redressing such Grievances, as his Majesty’s Subjects are and have been under, and which may have been the Cause of the aforesaid tumultuous disorderly Assembling together.” The General Assembly supported the governor in his desire to suppress the riots. Yet they warned the governor to do something about impressment and its impact upon the poor. “For quieting the Minds of such of the Inhabitants as have been
ruffled by the late Impress, we pray your Excellency to assure them, that all due care shall be taken for maintaining their just rights and Liberties, and for redressing all and every Grievance.” The legislators recognized that the rioting of the plebeians would not cease unless there was an end to the encroachment on their prerogatives.

Town meeting was at first divided, with one group asserting that condemning the rioters would encourage more impressment. Finally, in his dual roles as Speaker of the House and selectman, Hutchinson convinced the town meeting to support Shirley and castigate the “tumultuous riotous assembly.” In so doing, the town meeting denied that the “Generality of the Inhabitants . . . encouraged” the riot. It was the “Unanimous Opinion of the Town” that the perpetrators were “Foreign Seamen, Servants, Negroes and other Persons of Mean and Vile Condition.” While the General Assembly blamed the poor, Boston town meeting insisted they were the “foreign” poor.

Shirley was successful in his endeavors, and on the night of the nineteenth, “a strong Military Watch was kept in the Town, and the Riot suppress’d.” In another letter to his secretary the next day, Shirley remarked: “I hear the Fury of the Mob subsided last Night; but I shall by no means think the King’s Peace secur’d, or that the Militia of the town of Boston have done the least Part of their Duty, ’till I see a strong military Watch kept for some Nights, in the Town.” With the release of the impressed, the rioters went home. Those in the crowd from the militia could now muster, since no action against “rioters” need take place.

There was a hint of sarcasm in Hutchinson’s description of this muster. “But the next day there was an uncommon appearance of the militia of the town of Boston; many persons taking their muskets who never carried one upon any other occasion, and the governor was conducted to his house with as great parade as when he first assumed the government.” He concluded with a description of the departure of Commodore Knowles, whose “squadron sailed to the joy of the rest of the town.” Others applauded Knowles’s leaving, as it meant Boston waters were now free of the menace of impressment, and normal trade could commence. One newspaper commented: “Monday last Admiral Knowles Sail’d from Nantasket for the West Indies, . . . so that there is now Peace to him that goes out, and to him that comes in.” The rioters had accomplished their purposes.
The Aftermath

Violent collective action resulted in the freeing of the impressed on this occasion, and demonstrated Bostonians' hatred of this British institution. In 1759 Massachusetts Governor Thomas Pownall wrote to William Pitt of the well-known "Almost unconquerable Aversion" of Massachusetts people "to go on Board King's Ships." Pownall was revered for his sensitivity on the issue of impressment. When he left office in 1760, Boston town meeting sent him an enthusiastic tribute. They expressed praise that he had "with great prudence answered the demand for Seamen for his Majesty's Service, and yet preserved them from the burden of naval impressments." That is not to say that further attempts at impressment did not occur. They did, and were of continuing importance to the move toward revolution.

In 1768, for example, H.M.S. Romney received a press warrant. A crowd formed, and seeking the press gang boat, the rioters mistakenly burned a boat belonging to a customs inspector. A year later four men resisted a press gang from H.M.S. Rose, killing the officer in charge. Tried in Boston for piracy and murder, the accused men were found not guilty on the grounds of "justifiable homicide." At this point in time, the community sanctioned violent resistance against impressment as the time-honored right of the plebeians. But no further major impressment riots occurred in Boston. While impressment continued to be a major bone of contention between colonists and the British, Bostonians had made a stand on the issue that proclaimed their willingness to use force to protect themselves. This position easily translated into a willingness to rebel.

The triumph of the common people in the Knowles riot was due to their tenacity in protecting their rights. They faced no repercussions for their behavior, which further enhanced their victory. The authorities arrested only eleven men out of the thousands involved—five sailors, four laborers, a bookkeeper, and a housewright. Their punishment was remarkably light. Only three paid fines, and the others were acquitted. The crowd had been judicious and cautious in its violence—they beat several people, including the unfortunate deputy, but no one died. Property damage was minor. Their major weapon had been hostage taking, which terrified the victims and was a serious violation of law. Nonetheless, the rioters showed restraint when in several instances they could have wreaked havoc on those they defied. This inhibition on their part was due to their acceptance of the societal system that placed them in an inferior position. They had no thoughts of dismantling this system.
With little else to call their own, the poor were quick to defend the small privileges given them by tradition and law. The move to collective conduct happened only after a long series of abuses and attacks upon the customary rights of the lower orders. The King's government was insensitive to the oppression heaped upon the lower classes. The Boston gentry sympathized with their cause, thus condoning the actions of the common people. Violence became the common people's political tool of expression. In the minds of the crowd, their governors had exceeded the bounds of what was morally and legally acceptable in their social world. The circumstances mandated rioting. The willingness of the Boston crowd to engage in social violence would become a major instrument for revolution in the hands of Boston's patriot leaders.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Boston's plebeians carried out acts of selective communal social violence. They did so to counter threats to the community posed by new capitalistic techniques, to oppose those who transgressed upon local mores and norms, and to remind others of their legal and social obligations. For the next fifteen years, the only serious rioting occurred on Pope Days. In their conflict with the British, Bostonians used communal social violence for political purposes. The American Revolution enshrined the use of collective violence as an expression of participatory democracy in events such as the Stamp Act riot and the Boston Tea Party. After independence, no riots took place in eighteenth-century Boston.

With a rising capitalistic transformation of the economy in the nineteenth century, and the breakdown of community togetherness because of the growing impersonality of the new economic system, collective violence would take on a more specialized and more violent tack. Rampant individualism would sever ties in the community and foster associational patterns based upon race, class, and background. This new phase of "popular disorder" would last until "about 1940," wrote one historian. "Americans could kill each other because they did not identify with each other." Nineteenth-century Boston would have its share of violent interludes, based upon anxieties over race, norm enforcement, and anti-Catholicism.