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Research Articles

"Who Will [Independence] Please but Ambitious Men?": Rebels, Loyalists, and the Language of Liberty in the American Revolution

—Alexa Price (Editor: Cory McKenzie)

On January 9, 1776, six months before the American colonies declared independence, the *New Hampshire Gazette* published a letter to the state congress at Exeter, warning New Hampshire's patriot leaders against following the Continental Congress's motions to separate from Britain. The author, under the pseudonym of "Junius," compared the dispute between Britain and America to a worn-out quarrel between angry men, which had escalated such that both sides "no longer regard their interest or advantage, but the gratification of their wrath" (Bouton 1874, vol. 8). When the *Gazette's* printer, loyalist Robert Fowles, refused to reveal the author's name, the state declared the article to be a work of sedition and halted the paper's publication (Brown 1983). The event was evidence of a change in New Hampshire's road to revolution, whereby patriots advocating for independence began to view loyalists as enemies who ought to be dealt with rather than ignored.

During my four years at the University of New Hampshire, I have focused on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British history. Professor Eliga Gould's course, *The Making of the British Empire*, introduced me more fully to British America and the history of loyalist ideology. Hoping to discover the reasons men chose to remain loyal to Britain, I applied to the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research for an Undergraduate Research Award (URA) to study New Hampshire loyalist writings. Through my grant I was able to conduct full-time research in various archives throughout the state, working with original and often unpublished eighteenth-century letters and petitions. I was surprised to learn that many loyalists did not explain their rationale, seeming to believe that loyalism was the most logical choice and needed no explanation. Following the documents led me to a new research topic: I began to study loyalist rhetoric in regards to liberty and representation and discovered surprising similarities in the ideologies that supported both patriotism and loyalism.



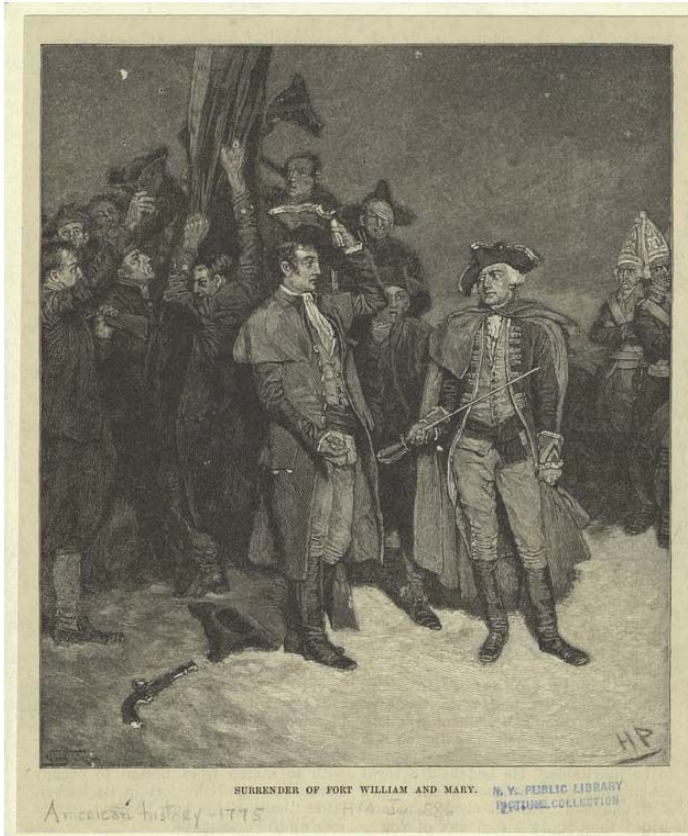
The author portraying a loyalist refugee at a living history event
(Courtesy of Willow Brook Photography, Pittsfield VT).

The American Loyalists and the Revolution in New Hampshire

Samuel Hale, a loyalist Portsmouth attorney, reflected in 1784 that the revolution had been such an easy success in New Hampshire because of a "want of union among the King's Friends" (Hale 1940). He recalled that the revolution proceeded quickly; New Hampshire's fate had been decided in December 1774 when a mob of several hundred captured Portsmouth's Fort William and Mary. The patriot mass carried off the fort's gunpowder, muskets, and small canon, and shipped the materials up the Piscataqua River to neighboring towns. Patriot strength forced the Royal Governor, John Wentworth, to flee the state, preventing any loyalist leadership he might otherwise have provided (Brown 1983).

There was, however, no shortage of loyalist citizens in New Hampshire. Although loyalists had not organized to stop the 1774 raid, they formed their own committees in Portsmouth, joined the British army, created a militia called Wentworth's Volunteers (Brown 1983), and even formed associations to migrate to Upper Canada (modern-day

Ontario) (Acheson 1997). When Britain's Loyalist Claims Commission considered the compensation due to New Hampshire loyalists who had lost property and livelihoods in the Revolutionary War, it received petitions from loyal gentlemen, lawyers, and men connected with the Royal government in Portsmouth as well as more humble innkeepers, physicians, farmers, and weavers (Great Britain Commission).



The capture of Fort William and Mary, as imagined by Howard Pyle, printed in *Harper's Magazine*, 1886 (New York Public Library Picture Collection).

In the early 1770s, when the revolution was young in New Hampshire, a resident may have found it difficult to distinguish between the beliefs of loyalists and those of other citizens. Discontent with British governing policies was common in America, but desire for independence was not a majority opinion. Discontented citizens were originally reluctant to separate from Britain and favored compromise or home rule, through which the American colonies could partially govern themselves under British protection. In town councils, influential men who gathered to discuss grievances believed that petitioning for home rule was a more secure option for attaining a satisfactory form of representative government.

The distinction that later arose between "loyalist" and "patriot" obscured the fact that loyalism was not a new ideology. Loyalists had not recently appeared in opposition to revolution, but rather remained true to the original ideas of compromise while around them patriots began to express revolutionary ideas. Written and printed documents demonstrate that patriots and loyalists shared a common rhetoric based on the importance of individual rights and liberty. The true difference was that patriots used that rhetoric to argue for independence, while loyalists continued to oppose revolution and support compromise with Britain.

"Taking Up Government"

The anonymous article from the *New Hampshire Gazette* provides an example of loyalist compromise-based language. Stating that America's

original desire for political reform was not unfounded, Junius writes, "We began the controversy on this principle, to seek *Redress of Grievances*, [but the public has] lost sight of the object, and are in quest of what will terminate most certainly in our ruin and destruction" (Bouton 1874, vol. 8). To him, those who favored independence acted with a collective enthusiasm but without attention to reason or possible consequences. It was better, he thought, to ask Britain for compromise on political representation than to seek what he called "independency." After all, America was dependent on foreign trade as part of Britain's empire, and had little military power to speak of. In his reasoning, America could not support itself even if a revolution succeeded.

Worst of all, Junius thought, was the issue of taxation. He shared the patriot dislike of taxation but pointed out that if an independent America were to exist, taxes would need to be raised "tenfold" in order to support an army and a navy to protect the seacoast. "Now which is most eligible," he asked, "to be independent, and pay 15 Dollars tax, or to be in the condition we were in 1762 and pay one. Who will [independence] please but ambitious men?" (Bouton 1874, vol. 8).

Junius believed, moreover, that his opinion was not unusual. On the subject of taxation, he was certainly correct; recent scholarship agrees that loyalists approved of colonial taxation no more than American revolutionaries did. In addition to taxation, Junius reasoned that the public would feel "exceedingly averse" to "Independency" on the basis that the colonies, lacking large-scale manufacture and a defensive navy, could not survive without Britain's trade and protection (Bouton 1874, vol. 8). While Junius openly admitted that he concurred with public outrage against taxation and "tyrannical measures," he begged New Hampshire's congress to favor reasonable discussion with Britain and to oppose independence.

Although condemned as a loyalist, Junius wrote about concerns similar to those voiced by his patriot neighbors and

in the provincial courts during the pre-revolutionary years. Before revolution was even an idea in New Hampshire, Committees of Correspondence, created to express America's grievances to Britain, had written letters to Parliament addressing their discontent concerning taxation (Bouton 1873, vol. 7). At the same time, however, they had recorded in their proceedings that they were resolved not to act rashly. Committee letters addressed the fear of "taking up government," or of creating a distinct government for New Hampshire that would be clearly separate from Great Britain. Like the later Junius, the early Committees were wary of "independency" and continued to avoid the appearance of supporting it for several years.

By December 21, 1775, men from twelve towns "chosen by the People...to represent them in the Congress of [New Hampshire]" were fearful of new ideas that looked too much like "setting up an Independency on the Mother Country" (Bouton 1874, vol. 8). They believed the people they represented "never expected us to make a new form of government, but only to set the judicial and executive wheels in motion." Rational compromise, they believed, continued to be the favorable option. As late as January 10, 1776, the day immediately after Junius's publication, a town meeting in Portsmouth cautiously discussed the matter: "We have just received Certain Advices That our Friends in Great Britain are at this very Time Exerting themselves...for a redress of our Grievances, and...will Finally Prevail if it is at once fully believed that we are not aiming at *Independency*" (Bouton 1874, vol. 8). Although the Portsmouth meeting convened at the same time Junius's article was being declared treasonable, its attendees did not face accusations of loyalism for their concerns. The language of liberty, compromise, and representation was a double-sided coin, able to fit both loyalist and rebel rhetoric in a way that could substantially blur the line between the two. While fear of independence smacked of treason when expressed by Junius, the same conviction caused no stir coming from a town meeting; New Hampshire seemed fairly arbitrary in deciding who was a loyalist and who was merely cautious.

Justice and Natural Rights

While some loyalists formed arguments based on rational government and taxation, others voiced concerns about justice and the rights of men. Tension regarding legal rights increased as the revolution progressed, and patriotic men began to question the motives of loyalists as being seditious. In April 1776, the New Hampshire Committee of Safety created the Association Test, which required all white men of able mind and at least 21 years of age to sign an oath that they would take up arms for independence if need arose (Brown 1983). The Committee, which largely dealt in military intelligence and the protection of "American" rights, also took up the task of handling suspected loyalists, confiscating certain loyalist property, questioning suspected loyal men, and placing some men under surveillance or house arrest while sentencing others to imprisonment.

The morality of New Hampshire's dealings with loyalists faced scrutiny in petitions written from prison, where suspected loyalists had been sent in towns such as Portsmouth or Exeter on accusations of seditious behavior. Petitioners often used the language of liberty and natural rights against those who imprisoned them, drawing attention to what they perceived as hypocrisy in the rebel cause.

On June 30, 1777, several men imprisoned in Portsmouth wrote to the New Hampshire Committee of Safety; among the petitioners were the land surveyor Isaac Rindge, the customs collector William Torrey, and the maker of mathematical instruments William Hart. They had been arrested only for refusing to sign the Association Test, thinking it unfair that they be forced take an "Oath of Allegiance" to New Hampshire. Their petition begs "leave with all the earnestness which liberty can inspire, or the loss of it create—again humbly to represent our situation to that authority which can alone redress it, and to entreat protection from those whom the State hath chosen to protect and safe-guard all its Members" (*To the honorable the Committee of Safety 1777*). In this way the writers point out the state's hypocrisy; New Hampshire had promised to protect its citizens, but imprisoned men who had committed no crime but refusing to sign an oath they did not feel was legally imposed. The petition writers appeal to the law, declaring the Association Test illegal for thus singling them out and for sending them to prison when current New Hampshire law stated that no one suspected of treason would be imprisoned until granted a fair trial by the Grand Jury of the state.

Other petitions are more eloquent and polemical. On July 19, 1777, nine men wrote from prison in Exeter claiming that they had been placed in prison on the basis of nothing but "enthusiasm and suspicion...Whose breath is sufficient to poison and blast with Ruine, not a few individuals only, but whole empires" (*To the honorable the Council 1777*). Their petition appeals to the humanity of the commissioners and the belief in natural rights, asking the court to imagine "persons deprived of all they held dear to them at one stroke their personal liberty and security gone, their property perishing." Like the Portsmouth petitioners, the Exeter writers lament how they have been imprisoned without trial on nothing but suspicion, maintaining that even the worst criminals have always by their natural rights been allowed a hearing.

A final example comes from the journal of Edward Parry, a Portsmouth mast merchant. In an expressive and even

witty account, Parry exudes dislike of rebel enthusiasm and questions the rationality of American rebels. When put on trial and sent to Sturbridge, Massachusetts, in April 1775 for allegedly supplying masts to the British navy, Parry mocks his interrogator, representative Samuel Thompson of the New Hampshire Congress, and portrays the rebels as a foolish mass. In Parry's words Thompson is only a "violent highflying Stuttering foolish fellow" and his rebel committee is no better: "liquor circulated very briskly in the Committee Room, which contributed much to display the Oratorical Powers of the Members" (Maguire 1970).

Like the Portsmouth petitioners, Parry believed in individual liberty and questioned the legality of the oath of allegiance. His earlier imprisonment did not dissuade him from being outspoken in his loyalism, and he openly refused when he was summoned to take the oath in 1777. He believed that the laws of this newly forming state, purportedly based on liberty and justice, were strangely contradictory. He despised the oath and said he was the "only person responsible for my own conduct" (Maguire 1970). While Parry clearly favored liberty, justice, and rationality in government, he did not lose faith in Britain for its shortcomings in America. As he reported explaining to one interested patriot, grievances of taxation and reform plagued mainland Britain as well, but no revolution occurred there. Harkening back to ideas of compromise, Parry demonstrated that it was possible to hope for a redress of grievances while remaining a loyal Briton.

Introduction of a petition written by loyalists imprisoned in Exeter, July 19, 1777, in which they state that "their situation is such as Loudly Calls for the attention of the Legislative body of this State . . . [and they will] attempt to give a Just Representation of the injuries that by some inexplicable Fatality they have been obliged to undergo" (*New Hampshire State Archives*).

Common Ground and Common Sense

In these documents, loyalists appeal to the same American beliefs that formed the core of revolution. Extolling the virtues of liberty and justice, denouncing the state's denial of trials by jury, and expecting that a government should provide protection, they echo ideas that the Continental Congress wrote into the Declaration of Independence. But rather than sympathizing with the rebels' plight, their words and tone cast patriots as hypocrites who denied other men the rights that they themselves felt deprived of through Britain's rule. As the Exeter petitioners write, "It is said the times are difficult and Therefore Extraordinary measures are necessary. Here we cannot but Reply, that if the times are so difficult, so much the Greater is the Necessity and obligation of Administering Justice with Exactness and Regularity" (*To the honble the Council 1777*).

While popular assumptions about loyalism conjure up ideas of treason and opposition to liberty, the loyalists considered here do not fit this unfairly imposed stereotype. The writings of New Hampshire loyalists reveal a group whose ideas, while driven by caution and reason, were not inherently contrary to America's desire for better colonial treatment. Just as some men saw revolution as a "common sense" route to improvement, loyalism simply appeared to be common sense for those that maintained it; as attorney Samuel Hale described his choice of reasonable loyalism over revolutionary enthusiasm by saying, "no honest man could keep any further semblance of being with the people" (Hale 1784). The surprising truth of loyalism, however, is that it was hardly anti-American. Despite not being "with the people," loyalists were no less willing to part with "natural" liberties than was a patriot. They opposed taxation, favored reform, and revered the standards of justice and representation. Loyalists were not opposed to American ideals or the rights that the revolution fought to preserve; they simply advocated a different route for preserving them.

I would like to thank Professor Eliga Gould, my faculty mentor, for providing the inspiration for my project and for his continued support throughout my research period. I am grateful to UNH's Dimond Library, where I spent many days perusing microfilms and loyalist documents in the Milne Special Collections; to the staff at the Exeter Historical Society for always welcoming me and helping me navigate the New Hampshire State Papers and locate loyalist

histories from their town; and to the Portsmouth Athenaeum, the New Hampshire Historical Society, and the New Hampshire State Archives for providing access to countless original documents that brought me as close as I could ever be to my eighteenth-century subjects.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Alexa Price is a senior history major from Brentwood, New Hampshire, who hopes to pursue a career as a professor of British history. In addition to her major, she is working on a minor in French. Alexa's January 2012 Undergraduate Research Award (URA) allowed her to study the political rhetoric of loyalists in New Hampshire during the Revolutionary War. It was exciting for her to read original, often handwritten and unpublished, loyalist documents at the Portsmouth Athenaeum, the New Hampshire Historical Society in Concord, and other archives around the Granite State. Despite the popular view of loyalists as traitors to the cause of revolution, she found that both loyalists and patriots valued liberty and opposed "taxation without representation." They differed only on the question of whether or not to break away from Britain. She said that the URA project provided her "a totally new experience that students don't often have access to in class." After graduation from UNH in May 2013, Alexa, a member of the University Honors Program, will begin doctoral studies at George Washington University, where she believes the research skills she has learned will prove very helpful. Besides history, Alexa enjoys ballroom and swing dancing, and participates in historical reenactments. By presenting historical events and figures in as accurate detail as possible, Alexa sees reenactment as a means of sharing her historical knowledge with others.

Professor **Eliga Gould**, chair of the University of New Hampshire's Department of History, specializes in the American Revolution and has written extensively on the cultural ties between Britain and its American colonies. In a class on the British Empire, he delivered a lecture on loyalism in the rebellious colonies which inspired Alexa Price's own research on New Hampshire loyalists. Although he has mentored many students in his twenty years at UNH, it had been some time since Professor Gould mentored a student with a URA grant. He believes that "the best part about supervising an independent research project by a student is that you get to learn something about her or his topic that you didn't know before." He said this was "certainly true" of Alexa's investigation of loyalists in revolutionary New Hampshire. "The URA is a great program," Dr. Gould affirmed. "I'm very glad UNH has it."

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