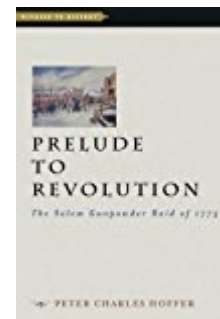


**Peter Charles Hoffer.** *Prelude to Revolution: The Salem Gunpowder Raid of 1775.*  
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In *Prelude to a Revolution: The Salem Gunpowder Raid of 1775*, Peter Charles Hoffer seeks to revise the opening chronology of the American Revolution. For Hoffer, the famous shots fired at Lexington were not the first acts of the Revolution but were instead “scene two” (p. 5). For the real opening gambit of the Revolution, he directs attention to the town of Salem on February 26, 1775. On that day, about 250 British regulars, by the order of General Thomas Gage in Boston and under the command of Colonel Alexander Leslie, marched to Salem on a gunpowder raid, intent on collecting munitions that could potentially fall into the hands of those conspiring against British authority in North America. Leslie’s mission failed, however, foiled by a resistant townspeople and the tactical employment of a drawbridge. Despite the fact that no shots were fired, this moment in history, Hoffer contends, marked a new beginning. He makes two separate and overlapping arguments for this interpretation. In one, he argues that what happened at Salem and Lexington were very much connected, so much so that

the two events should be considered together. The second, much more ambitious argument is that the failed gunpowder raid at Salem was a transformative moment in its own right, as British settlers in North America began for the first time to believe that the defeat of the British military was possible and that a people could in fact govern themselves.

Hoffer opens his study in 1774 as tensions between “patriots” and “loyalists” in Massachusetts were reaching a fevered pitch. Salem, as Hoffer outlines in chapter 1, had a particularly strong loyalist faction, led by the distinguished Salem lawyer and landholder William Browne. He and his supporters curried favor with imperial administrators by rejecting missives from Boston radicals like Samuel Adams and often, as a reward, received lucrative appointments. So powerful were the loyalist voices in Salem that, in 1774, when the newly appointed imperial governor of the colony, Thomas Gage, sought to call a new meeting of the general court, one that would be more amenable to imperial demands, he chose Salem, not Boston,

to be its location. Patriot sentiment would prove irrepressible at that meeting, however, even within the friendly confines of Salem. The rising patriot fervor in the colony is on further display in chapter 2, as Hoffer follows two British officers, disguised as surveyors, as they venture into the hinterland in search of information concerning patriot numbers and arms. They found few friends and little assistance on their journey, their circumstances growing increasingly dire the farther away they traveled from the British troops stationed in Boston.

With chapters 1 and 2 as context, Hoffer then turns to Leslie's raid in Salem and its momentous consequences. In 1774 and 1775, British forces in Boston were intent on possessing as much of the munitions, especially cannons, from the surrounding areas as possible. These efforts were called "Powder Alarms" or "Gunpowder Raids." Upon hearing that in Salem patriot craftsmen were making carriages so that the cannons stored there could be transported to locations unknown, General Gage ordered a raid of Salem's armaments before that could happen, turning to Leslie to lead the expedition. The scene that greeted Leslie, detailed in chapter 3, was reminiscent of the welcome received by the two spies in chapter 2. The town's population, with seemingly few exceptions, was openly antagonistic to the crown and its agents. Leslie arrived from the south, but Salem's foundry was located north of town and could be reached only by crossing a river, preferably by bridge. The North Bridge, however, was a drawbridge with two leaves, the far leaf from Salem being controlled only by those on that side of river, which by the time of Leslie's arrival was populated by a group hostile to his intentions. Directed by Gage to avoid violence and respect private property, Leslie arrived to impossible circumstances. He had no effective means to bend the will of these "farm boys" and "minutemen," who had amassed on the north side of the river, had raised the drawbridge, and were more interested in directing insults at Leslie than in obeying

any of his orders (p. 72). By allowance of the people assembled in Salem, Leslie was eventually permitted to march a short distance over the bridge but not far enough to discover any of the sought-after cannons. After that, he and his troops were promptly sent packing on an ignominious march back to Boston.

In chapter 4, Hoffer argues that these events at Salem were crucial pretext to the first shots fired at Lexington. Lessons learned at Salem, by both sides, influenced what happened there. The patriot supporters had learned, or so they thought, that the British would not fire on colonial militia, so they needed only to present a defiant posture, against even the longest odds. On the other side, the British were also pushed towards more aggressive considerations, determined not to leave another confrontation to the ringing cat-calls of American patriots. For Hoffer, Salem set the scene at Lexington in way that may not have predetermined a violent outcome, but made it much more likely. Even given the scant documentary evidence that directly supports the influence of Salem on the actors at Lexington, the case Hoffer makes for Salem as important context for the more conventional starting point of the revolution is plausible and compelling. The more ambitious claim, that the events at Salem represented, on their own, a transformative moment in American history, is more problematic.

In his introduction, Hoffer quotes approvingly John Adams and his famous observation that the hearts and minds of the colonists had turned against the empire far earlier than July 4, 1776, but argues that this changing mindset, to be made permanent, still needed "a ritual of the passing of legitimate power from an imperial sovereign to a sovereign people that everyone understood" (p. 3). For Hoffer, this happened at Salem with the triumph of a resolute citizenry and the acquiescence of equally visible military authority. The theoretical importance of a "highly visible event" to ideological change is made by assertion, however, and

is never explained, in either the text or the notes. This is a problem, as is the evidence from regional periodicals that Hoffer provides to make his case, which hardly seem to justify his classification of event as “a sensation at the time” (p. 86). Even if his premise of the importance of a visible event is accepted, it is not altogether clear that Leslie’s retreat meets that standard. In many ways, Hoffer’s study actually offers compelling evidence for the very observation made by Adams that he is attempting to revise. What comes across clearly in his study is that popular sentiment across social classes in Massachusetts had turned against imperial rule by early 1775. For many people, lines had already been drawn and sides chosen. Did Leslie’s retreat exacerbate tensions in New England between patriots and loyalists? Almost certainly. But did anything transformative occur for colonists outside of Salem who were already actively opposing the imperial rule in numerous ways? That seems far less certain.

Hoffer’s close study of the gunpowder raid in Salem and the many people involved succeeds far more than it falters, however. Many of the details provided, such as an innkeeper offering tea to customers as an indication of loyalist sensibilities or townspeople heckling the British troops with lines like, “I should think you were all fiddlers you shake so,” are fascinating in their own right, but they also, more broadly, bring home the many contingencies in human events that become clear only through close, ground level historical investigation. By carefully following the action of Leslie’s retreat, Hoffer correctly identifies that many of the same factors that led to violence at Lexington were present at Salem as well. Had Leslie been a more hot-tempered military leader or had he made any number of possible miscalculations that would have been reasonable given the confused circumstances that he was confronted with, shots could have been fired at Salem. For that matter, violence could have erupted in numerous other places in Massachusetts during the spring of 1775, given the right confluence of circumstances. No

historian, Hoffer maintains, can ignore the role of contingency in why and how things ultimately come to be. But in the end, for reasons that in many ways defy easy explanation, shots were not fired in Salem; they were in Lexington, and those actions then fixed both sides on the path towards full-scale war. It is asking too much of historical memory, as Hoffer does in his final chapter lamenting the lost memory of Leslie’s retreat, to ask people to be aware of all the places that great events could have happened. That is why, in the popular memory of the American Revolution, Salem will always play second fiddle to Lexington, making its best case for recognition by trying to secure a small portion of the spotlight that shines so brightly elsewhere. Is that fair? Probably not, but such is history and its many contingencies.

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