

PRE-REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM IN AMERICAN TAVERNS

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Madeline is a third year Honors History Major and Political Science Minor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. While taking a seminar on the history of coffeehouses and substances in Europe, she became interested in the unique public sphere that sprang up around beverages. A dual American/Canadian citizen focusing on American History in Canada, Madeline decided to look abroad and was intrigued to find out just how influential tavern culture had been in shaping an American identity and encouraging military mobilization before the American Revolution.

Between its colonization in the late seventeenth century and the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century, New England had never wholly accepted a British nationalist identity. Further, the sociopolitical climate in the colonies differed greatly from post-revolutionary Americanism; the region had not yet become a community limited in its boundaries and sovereign from the monarchy.¹ This colonial period instead represents the genesis of American nationalist ideas. Philosopher and social anthropologist Ernest Gellner contends that “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”² American nationalism was developing well before the region’s political and territorial independence.³ And this creation process has its roots in the colonial public sphere.

Taverns, or public houses, were crucial in fostering a nationalist identity because they were the most numerous public social institutions in the New England colonies.⁴ Throughout the eighteenth century, the

¹ Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6-7. Anderson describes nations, or imagined communities, as limited and sovereign communities.

² Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 169.

³ Van Alstyne Richard Warner, *Genesis of American Nationalism* (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell Pub., 1970), 1.

⁴ David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink & the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, NC: Published for the Institute of Early

number of taverns multiplied. In 1693, Philadelphia had just twelve public houses, but by 1769 it had one hundred seventy eight.⁵ One reason they expanded so rapidly was because they could be owned by both men and women from various economic backgrounds, and tavern doors were typically open to all.⁶ This concept of taverns represents Benedict Anderson's notion of nationalism as a "fraternity of equals," because these institutions were inclusive to colonial citizens and respectable men were treated equally within them.⁷ The tavern trade was unlike any other because it began as a profitable occupation that expanded its public and national influence to a much broader population.

Taverns represented colonial American civility. They were strictly regulated and hosted a variety of cultural activities in the public sphere. But aside from their many uses, taverns were sometimes considered controversial institutions because of their association with the immoralities of alcohol that could transgress Puritan values of moderation and conservatism.⁸ To counteract this reputation, licenses were granted on a limited basis and the British regulated their services.⁹ Any record of public disorder could disqualify someone from running a tavern. For example, friends of John Spering, a hopeful tavern owner from Philadelphia, testified that he had for "some time had kept a public house of entertainment," and would maintain "no disorderly house."¹⁰ However because he had once sold alcoholic beverages without a license, he was prohibited from ever obtaining one. These background checks served to maintain the good repute that tavern-keepers had in their community. They were to be trusted and counted on to positively influence customer behavior and civic responsibility. Likewise, those who had the opportunity to regularly visit respectable taverns came to represent the type of behavior encouraged within them. Historian David S. Shields notes that "despite

American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 2.

⁵ Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch & Revolution: Taverngoing & Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷ Anderson. *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 84.

⁸ Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution; Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 24.

⁹ Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution; Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 33.

¹⁰ John William Wallace Collection of Ancient Records of Philadelphia 1702-1847, "Presentations of the Grand Inquest," Nov. 2, 1703.

the imposition of royal licensing...taverns remained [honorable] havens so long as they kept tolerable order.”¹¹ Therefore, many taverns represented and encouraged aspects of the early American identity centered on upholding public decency.

The tavern as a public space hosted an array of “civic activities,” including “auctions, plays, exhibitions, [and] governmental meetings,” according to historian David S. Shields.¹² They housed most colonial social congregations and were the nucleus for east coast cultural expansion. Considering their many uses and characteristics, taverns truly represented the emerging American identity and nationalism in colonial New England. For these reasons, they are historical symbols of early Americanism. Taverns in colonial America served a much greater purpose than serving drinks—they kindled the beginnings of American nationalism because of their role in commerce, social life, and political discussions.

COMMERCE AT THE TAVERNS

Public houses first became significant for the American identity because of their impact on the economy. In fact, some were created for the sole purpose of becoming trade-hubs to avoid association with drunkenness. As an example, the Old London Coffeehouse was built in 1754 Philadelphia as the first New England tavern to serve this purpose. Its first floor sold alcoholic beverages, while the second floor was for gentlemanly conversation and monetary exchange without liquor.¹³ This tavern was inspired by coffeehouses in England that were built with the intention of encouraging world trade, and it reflects the maturing American economy where trade was becoming more institutionalized in New England. As the number of similar taverns increased across expanding cities of the east coast, they created trade networks that began to structure a system for the domestic and international economy. This led to nationalistic growth, as the monetary connections between coffeehouses in different regions helped New England gain gradual independence from the British economy. Benedict Anderson argues that it is “well known and obviously of fundamental importance” that economic development in

¹¹ David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, NC: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³ Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution; Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 106-107.

colonies relates to the creation of nationhood.¹⁴ Examining multiple types of coffeehouse commerce abroad and within New England regions reinforces this idea of growing nationalism in the colonies. In particular, taverns fostered international trade by supporting overseas trade discussions, a mail system, networking with merchants, and recruiting sailors. They also encouraged domestic trade by accommodating the sale of valuables such as real estate and slaves, and more affordable items such as household furniture. All of these economic examples help to explain how coffeehouses encouraged the growth of nationalism.

To begin with, taverns were essential for trans-Atlantic trade networking outside the colonies. New England taverns were similar to those in London because they housed trade deals and facilitated discussions between traders and partners abroad.¹⁵ As an example, Spain was one key supplier to the colonies outside of the British realm and Spaniards commonly discussed trade in American taverns. Dr. Alexander Hamilton references the Spanish trade in his *Itinerarium* journal. While visiting the owner of what Hamilton believed to be “the best public house in the country” in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, Hamilton was told that “a large Spanish snow” brought “some prizes” and thirty thousand pounds of silver to Newport.¹⁶ This entry signifies that the tavern-owner had specific knowledge of international commerce which he would not have had access to if he was not managing a public house on the New England coast. On a visit to another tavern, Hamilton met Spanish merchants who had sailed to New England for international trade purposes.¹⁷ This demonstrates again how public houses were a common meeting place for the shipping community. The Spanish presence indicates that the colonies were becoming more influential in the world economy, and were not completely reliant on Britain’s imports and economic influence. In addition to accommodating trade discussions, New England taverns were central to the international post system. Letters that came from ships abroad were often sent directly to public houses. These taverns then worked as de facto post offices that even provided mailboxes for regular receivers.¹⁸ Taverns helped establish New England as an independent

¹⁴ Anderson. *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 64.

¹⁵ Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America*, 60.

¹⁶ Hamilton, Dr. Alexander. “Sugar Loaf,” *Itinerarium; DIE MERCURII TRIGESSIMO MENSIS MAII INCHOATUM ANNO MDCCXLIV* (1712-1756), 337.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 506.

¹⁸ Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America*, 60.

player in the world economy, separate from British control, which was essential for the development of American nationalism.

Taverns on the eastern seaboard likewise operated as business centres for American merchants and ship captains.¹⁹ Public houses accommodated negotiations regarding purchasing ships and filling them with cargo.²⁰ Roberts's Coffeehouse in Philadelphia, for example, hosted discussions regarding a ship called the *Dove*. People came to Roberts's if they wished to travel aboard, and merchants also came to decide which items would be transported on the *Dove*.²¹ Taverns such as this one encouraged overseas mercantilism through its congregations. Additionally, taverns were important for recruiting sailors to protect trade on the New England coastline. A similar advertisement to that for the *Dove*, was for "All able-bodied seamen" to visit the King's-Head Tavern in Boston if they wished to sail on the "Privateer Ship Pownell" under Captain James Semple. This ship would defend the coast against "his Majesty's Enemies" in the international trade.²² The article also advertised for a surgeon to meet at the tavern so that he could join the crew. Taverns were a meeting place for the brave sailors who wished to protect the colonial American economy or participate in trade voyages. The choice to defend the coastline represents Anderson's idea of patriotism and "self-sacrificing love" for one's territory that he argues is an essential aspect of nationalism.²³ From such public house meetings grew the idea of America as a member of the international economic community, contributing to a sense of shared identity. Reflecting their patriotism, crews would also celebrate in New England taverns when an expedition was completed, and could sign up for another while they drank.²⁴ Taverns in colonial America were thus central to the expansion of international trade and the development of nationalism tied to economic interests.

Taverns were also central to the domestic economy; this was perhaps of greater significance than international trade in regards to developing an exclusively American identity. Both urban and rural environments participated in local commerce. Taverns were used for the

¹⁹ Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America*, 60.

²⁰ Thompson, "'The Friendly Glass': Drink and Gentility in Colonial Philadelphia," 569.

²¹ *Mercury* (June 13, 1727).

²² *Boston Post-Boy*, issue 52. (August 14, 1758).

²³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 141.

²⁴ Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution; Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 80.

sale of highly valuable commodities, slaves, and household items. Colonial newspaper classifieds contained innumerable advertisements for valuable commodities available at the nearest tavern, including the sales of ships and ships' parts and real estate transactions. In 1714, for example, contents of the ship *Hanover*, including its hull and inventory, were being sold at the Crown Coffeehouse in Boston.²⁵ Ship sales at taverns encouraged the domestic market for such a pricy commodity rather than promoting foreign purchases. New England merchants could choose not to purchase one of its colonizer's most expensive exports and could instead contribute to the economic success that strengthened national cohesiveness of pre-revolutionary America. In addition to ships, land and real estate were also sold at public houses. A 1739 issue of the *American Weekly Mercury* contained advertisements for multiple properties to be sold at a Philadelphia tavern. This real estate sale included two houses, four waterfront lots, a plantation, and a few "Tracks of Lands" that varied from 300 to 1250 acres.²⁶ Like the ship, these sales were of great value in the American economy, and they exemplify how tavern culture encouraged American real estate investment. This support for domestic trade strengthened the economy, which became an essential part of American nationalism.

Another way that public houses supported the emerging economy was through the domestic slave trade. For example, a 1739 issue of the *New-England Weekly Journal* advertised the sale outside a tavern of "a likely Negro Boy about 16 year[s] of age that has been in the country some years."²⁷ Such advertisements, and others in the *New-York Mercury*, were extremely common and drew many potential slave owners to taverns.²⁸ The Old London Coffee House in Philadelphia, located in a bustling public square (see image below), provides an interesting example of the prominence of the tavern slave trade because it had a slave-trading block outside of its entrance.²⁹ Taverns were essential to slave trading in the northeastern colonies, which encouraged an active domestic economy. This exchange at public houses also foreshadowed the significance of slavery in post-colonial American everyday life.

²⁵ *Boston News-Letter*, issue. 545. (September 1714).

²⁶ *American Weekly Mercury*, 3., issue. 1020 (July 19, 1739).

²⁷ *New-England Weekly Journal*, 2. Issue 644 (August 21, 1739).

²⁸ *New York Mercury*, 4. Issue 373 (New York, October 8, 1759). This is one of countless advertisements for slaves found on the archive of Early American Newspapers, Series I, 1690-1876, Readex.

²⁹ *Library Company of Philadelphia Print Dept. BW – Hotels, Inns, Taverns* [9245. Q.20], Online Digital Collections



Old London Coffee House, Philadelphia, PA with slave-trading block

Besides slaves, more affordable commodities such as furniture and utensils for one's household could also be purchased at colonial American taverns. The same 1739 advertisement in *New-England Weekly Journal* that listed the sale of a slave also marketed various items for the home: utensils, chairs, tables, a chest of drawers, and a copper kettle.³⁰ Given the variety of goods sold at public houses, the tavern trade was significant to the American economy. This exchange also provided a base for a national identity to develop by assembling and bonding the community, exemplified especially at tavern auctions. Auctions encouraged crowds of people to gather for the excitement of sales even if they could not afford them.³¹ Sales at taverns therefore promoted both early American capitalism and community bonds.

In summary, taverns in New England served to promote international and domestic trade, which encouraged the colonies to mature economically. This market expansion through tavern sales lessened the need for British influence and encouraged the growth of a national identity.

³⁰ *New-England Weekly Journal*, 2. Issue 644 (August 21, 1739).

³¹ Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution; Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 80.

SOCIAL LIFE IN PUBLIC HOUSES

Taverns were at the centre of the developing colonial social sphere. Coinciding with German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's definition of the public sphere, New England taverns were nonexclusive social realms that almost always guaranteed freedom of speech, assembly, and association.³² Taverns brought together citizens of varying backgrounds – housing social organizations, facilitating the transmission of knowledge and opinions, and providing a venue for entertainment. All of these human interactions helped shape societal norms distinctive to New England that would eventually make up an integral part of an American identity.

Eighteenth century New England social organizations often congregated at taverns. These groups were significant because they provided Americans the liberty to choose whom they associated with and what they spoke about. This also foreshadowed key components of American constitutional rights that were established after the Revolution. Although clubs that flourished in New England by meeting at public houses were generally inclusive, the exclusive ones were still founded on values of community that were necessary for to catalyze national sentiments. An example is the Sea Captain's Club, which was "perhaps Philadelphia's most selective organization," according to historian William Bell Clark. This club was established in the later eighteenth century to provide financial aid to American voyagers who were affected by shipwrecks or other disasters at sea. Welfare money was obtained through admission fees, dues, donations, and some outside assistance.³³ The organization was first discussed at Elizabeth Gray's tavern in Pennsylvania. It was there that officers were chosen and articles were agreed upon. When the organization was launched, members celebrated in the taproom.³⁴ Their subsequent congregations continued to take place in taverns until the club ended in the twentieth century. The continual use of the tavern with its relaxed atmosphere signifies its practicality for a social venue in colonial times. As the tavern public sphere expanded, it became a hub for sharing nationalist ideas.

³² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 49-55.

³³ William Bell Clark, "The Sea Captains Club," (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 1953), 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

Similar to how the Sea Captain's Club celebrated its founding in Elizabeth Gray's taproom, other societies used tavern space for their festivities. The Society of Ancient Britons performed a grand celebration at Philadelphia's Indian King tavern on St. David's Day in 1732. They came with elaborate feather hats, went to St. Clement's Church, and returned to the tavern with the governor for an evening of "mirth and fellowship."³⁵ This tavern was ideal to The Ancient Britons because of its location, sufficient utensils, ample table space, and fashionable aesthetics. The tavern, like most others, was a practical and affordable meeting place for the club.³⁶ The Indian King and many other taverns accommodated club revelries, which became a part of early American culture. Philadelphia had a multitude of other clubs that met regularly at taverns; these include fishing companies, ethnic associations, a philosophical society, and the Governor's Club. Public houses were important because even the smallest of clubs could gather there and sit amongst other paying customers without needing a clubhouse.³⁷ Unlike many public houses in Britain at the time that were exclusive to intellectuals and wealthy gentlemen, the social institutions that blossomed within early American taverns allowed New Englanders to choose whom they identified with in the public sphere. This freedom of association became an important attribute of what Americans would include in their national identity.

Secondly, information and knowledge sharing was also a significant aspect of socialization in American taverns. Far from simply being places to drink, taverns encouraged education. For example, the London Coffee House sold raffle tickets in 1758 to raise funds for the College and Academy of Philadelphia.³⁸ Furthermore, education often took place within the taverns themselves. Reverend Louis Rowe, in his book *A Prospect of Chess-Play and Chess-Players, at the Coffee House New York* explores the interaction of "politicians, church musicians, ministers, lawyers, ship captains, and school masters" congregating to play "the most challenging of intellectual games."³⁹ Brought together in a tavern to stimulate their minds, the colonists were exposed to different perspectives. This intermingling of thought and knowledge in early America helped shape a nationalist identity.

³⁵ *Mercury* (Mar. 7, 1732).

³⁶ Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution; Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 63.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

³⁸ *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1., issue 1521 (Philadelphia, February 16, 1758).

³⁹ Shields, 61.

Education was promoted in many other forms in colonial American taverns. Like British coffeehouses, American public houses were sometimes known as “penny universities” that encouraged scholarly writings, political letters, philosophy, and news. Anderson calls these forms of art, “cultural products of nationalism.”⁴⁰ Some American writers even gained their readership through tavern culture. John Cotton, the author of “History of Bacon’s and Ingram’s Rebellion” in the 1680s, shared his work to tavern customers which helped him gain recognition as an early American writer.⁴¹ He likely would not have been able to share his works as widely had he not visited public houses regularly. Poets also benefited from this social space. The poet Henry Brooke enjoyed writing in the company of others while in colonial public houses; of his thirty-five existing works, twelve were written in the “writ of company” in coffeehouses and taverns.⁴² His choice of writing location among diverse people groups is reflected in his witty and spontaneous writing style that likewise represents the freedom of expression New Englanders upheld in early nationalist thought. In his poem, “A Discourse upon Je’sting attempted in the way of Horace,” he makes light of non-intellectual conversations in taverns and coffeehouses. In conclusion, Brooke wrote,

Dare to be Wise, let je’sts be Firmins Fame [a colonial punster]; Erect your Mind; persue a nobler aime;
In short be your own Contrary: – and then,
You’l know what’s to be Man, and how to live with Men.⁴³

Brooke’s poem suggests that men who came to speak in public houses must be attentive to what they hear and say, not taking at face value all claims made. This concept was unlike the exclusive atmosphere of many British taverns that catered to the most respectable men. The inclusiveness of early American public houses contributed to democratic ideals that were unique to the young region. Regardless of the value of what was being transmitted, colonists were coming together in the public sphere, sharing information and ideas, and developing a shared identity.

Finally, American nationalism grew from a unique entertainment culture. Similar to the social aspects of congregating organizations and the public sharing of knowledge, taverns became places of amusement and

⁴⁰ Anderson. *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 141.

⁴¹ Shields, 60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 65-68.

⁴³ *MS Collection, Commonplace Book, Peters Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.*

vice. Historian Peter Thompson suggests, “[T]averns housed a distinctive kind of sociability—one that, for better or worse, exerted an influence beyond its immediate setting.”⁴⁴ Visits to taverns were often respectable, but sometimes they were associated with sin and immorality. The entertainment culture that taverns promoted was most controversial in comparison to other social uses of public houses. Benjamin Franklin and William Penn believed that taverns encouraged a slight increase of prostitution, gambling, and excessive drinking, but they also believed these vices would exist without taverns. However, because these ills became associated with tavern culture, public houses were continuously blamed for societal problems in American history. As a generalization, tavern-goers had a tendency to disregard some orthodox values while inside public house walls.⁴⁵ This was largely due to heavy drinking in the midst of early American music and gambling.⁴⁶

Music was one of the most popular entertaining practices in taverns. It was just as welcoming to people of different backgrounds and classes as it could be provocative in terms of the behavior it could promote.⁴⁷ The music played in taverns reflected the ideal of freedom of expression. An example of this concept is alluded to in a journal entry by Lutheran minister Henry Melchior Muhlenberg after listening to songs in a New Jersey tavern. He wrote,

The English people have a kind of song which is set to melodic music and describe all sorts of hero[e]s and feats of arms on land and sea. Respectable people sing them as a pastime and regard it as a serious invasion of their liberty if one protests against these songs, etc. Now if one rebukes them on account of their amorous songs, they believe that they can justify themselves by referring to these songs about heroes.⁴⁸

Muhlenberg suggests that tavern songs have a tendency to be vulgar through their “amorous” nature that is encouraged through drinking. However, the songs are patriotic because they can represent “liberty,” as

⁴⁴ Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution; Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁸ Theodore G. Tappert and John Doberstein, eds., *The Journals of the Rev. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, 3 Vols. (Evansville, Ind: Lutheran Historical Society, 1982).

he mentions. This passage supports the idea that music in taverns had an impact on American nationalist sentiment. It brought men together, and they gained kinship through a song. However, the pairing of music and alcohol in taverns, which was intended for social interaction, could sometimes lead to discomfort for other customers. For example, the Quaker Mr. Ashbridge took his wife to a Philadelphia tavern where his peers began to play music. Mrs. Ashbridge did not want to dance, but her husband, who had been drinking, pressured her to do so and she began to cry. "He pluck[e]d me round the room til tears affected my eyes, at sight whereof the musician stop[p]ed and said, 'I'll play no more, let your wife alone.'"⁴⁹ This passage portrays Mr. Ashbridge as aggressive in nature while under the influence of alcohol. However, bystanders in the tavern still proved to be courteous while defending the woman's choice to not dance. Despite the rowdiness, there was still a code of respectability that was upheld in some colonial taverns.

Gambling was another significant social activity that influenced early American identity. Gambling was a much more controversial undertaking than other forms of socialization in colonial American taverns because it generally had negative impact in the public sphere. Gambling, or "gaming," in eighteenth century taverns began to be regulated and sometimes banned altogether. For example, Virginia passed a 1705 law that forbade gambling on Sundays. Then in the 1740s, Virginia laws disallowed all games at taverns that involved cards or dice. Over the century, laws went through phases of banning games, and then allowing them to be played again. This was the case with billiards and checkers, for example.⁵⁰ These laws against gambling in taverns were specific to the New England colonies. On the other hand, breaking these laws against gambling represented the culture of rebellion that was emerging in America before the Revolution. For example, gambling culture thrived in eighteenth century Philadelphia in the form of betting on cockfights and horseraces. The White Horse tavern had become "the unofficial headquarters of the horse-racing community," and the gambling culture became so prominent there that Sassafras Street, where the tavern was

⁴⁹ Daniel B. Shea, ed., "Some account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge," in *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 162.

⁵⁰ Paton Yoder, "Tavern Regulation In Virginia: Rationale and Reality." *Property Rights in the Colonial Era and Early Republic*. Ed. James W. Ely. (Taylor & Francis, 1997). 403-23.

located, was renamed “Race Street.”⁵¹ Some taverns promoted the gambling culture, despite laws against it. The creation and breaking of laws against gambling in colonial American taverns represents experimentation with more Puritanical attempts at regulating behavior through law and the tendency of colonists to challenge laws they disagreed with during the time period. Gambling, and music, also became central to the culture of American entertainment.

Taverns served as a physical space for social interactions, allowing Americans to discuss knowledge and opinions, participate in social organizations, as well as develop a culture of entertainment. These became important aspects of a distinctive American culture.

POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN PUBLIC HOUSES

Beyond their impact on commerce and on the colonists’ social lives, taverns contributed most to the emergence of American nationalism before the Revolution by serving as sites of political discourse. For townsmen and travelers, taverns were the simplest place in the colonial public sphere to disseminate political ideas. In this regard, historian Peter Thompson compares taverns to a “public stage,” where “colonists resisted, initiated, and addressed changes in their society,” and in doing so, “redefined their relationships with figures of authority.”⁵² Therefore, taverns allowed new political ideas to flourish and significantly helped to foster organized opposition to British authorities. Political tavern-discussions saw the emergence of various ideas about the government that differed from British rule, and taverns became the proving ground for enduring revolutionary ideas.

Taverns encouraged freedom of speech within a society where political ideas were being developed in response to the orthodox British monarchical perspectives. Historian David W. Conroy contends that tavern assemblies were essential because they encouraged criticism of the government, drawing opinions from men of varying class and rank who were more at ease, as “the consumption of drink could... relax inhibitions and open up dialogue and debate among free white males without endangering in any immediate sense their authority over women and slaves, ordinarily not present at taverns.”⁵³ It is of no surprise that

⁵¹ Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution; Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 102.

⁵² Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 12.

⁵³ David W. Conroy. In *Public Houses; Drink and Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts*, 169., and Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible; Social*

grassroots American political discussion began in the tolerant public house environment. Often times, tavern keepers encouraged political discourse, and more than twenty-three of the three hundred fifty-five Sons of Liberty had tavern licenses before the American Revolution began. They understood how easily radical ideas could be shared within taverns, and strategically used them as political tools. They knew ideas would travel far outside their tavern walls.⁵⁴ Many tavern keepers, such as the Sons of Liberty, encouraged nascent American nationalism through free political discourse. A 1765 sketch from the Library Company of Philadelphia depicts the exchange of political ideas in taverns. In this picture, three men sit at a round table drinking beer and voice their support for the “Old Ticket.” A young slave on the right-hand side of the sketch states his accord, while the devil is depicted on the left-hand side of the sketch waving goodbye the men and stating “These fellows are too honest for me.” He supports the Presbyterian New Ticket for “McMurder” instead (see image below).⁵⁵ This sketch would have been political propaganda to encourage the beginnings of electoral partisanship in colonial New England. This support for civic participation and political affiliation was an important part of emerging nationalism in America.

Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1979), 186.

⁵⁴ Conroy. *In Public Houses; Drink and Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts*, 256.

⁵⁵ *A New Song Suitable to the Season, to the Tune of “Good English Beer.”* Broadside Ballad. Library Company of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1765)., and Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution; Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, 140.



1765 political cartoon

The significance of taverns in politics is evident in the journals of Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin; two of America's most politically active Founding Fathers. Public houses are mentioned on over sixty occasions in Alexander Hamilton's *Itinerarium*, a travel journal he kept between the years 1712 and 1756. On one visit to a New York tavern, Hamilton remarks how he had met "some rattling fellows playing backgammon," along with "some deeper headed politicians at the game of chess." When leaving the tavern, he intended to meet with a friend Mr. Bourdillon to "chat snuggly," perhaps about his experience at the tavern. Admitting to meeting politicians, he concludes the entry with an allusion to an intellectual conversation he had with Mr. Bourdiollon (with whom he returned home as would "two philosophers").⁵⁶ Hamilton's *Itinerarium* is full of references to him visiting, dining at, and even lodging in various taverns across cities and the New England countryside.⁵⁷ He likely spread

⁵⁶ Dr. Alexander Hamilton. *Itinerarium*; *DIE MERCURII TRIGESSIMO MENSIS MAII INCHOATUM ANNO MDCCXLIV* (1712-1756), 579.

⁵⁷ Hamilton, Dr. Alexander. "Sugar Loaf," *Itinerarium*; *DIE MERCURII TRIGESSIMO MENSIS MAII INCHOATUM ANNO MDCCXLIV* (1712-1756), 501-506. In this entry, Hamilton mentions how he was warmly welcomed to spend multiple nights at the Whitehall "publick house" while travelling through the New England countryside.

various political ideas across the region, as others carried them to more taverns. Similar to Alexander Hamilton, the Founding Father Benjamin Franklin mentioned taverns frequently throughout his writing. On one instance in his autobiography, Franklin wrote that he had met with a group of Quakers at a tavern for political objectives. He wrote, “they were determin’d to come and vote... if there should be an occasion.” Franklin then assisted eight of these Quakers in voting outside the tavern.⁵⁸ This passage is a clear example of how Franklin encouraged political activism in taverns by directly leading these Quakers from a tavern to where they could vote.

Lastly, and most significant to the development of American nationalism, was the blatant revolutionary and anti-monarchical dialogue fostered in eighteenth century taverns that continued throughout the American Revolution. Anti-British activism within taverns began when citizens disregarded laws specific to that public space. What began with disobeying gambling laws extended to disregarding other laws, such as establishing public houses without licenses. This was a way to actively and successfully resist British monarchical laws and encourage American nationalism.⁵⁹ Elisha Cooke was perhaps the leading figure in active political movements that began in public houses. Cooke established the Boston Caucus group that regularly met at taverns and secretly spread anti-British sentiment to transform American politics. Some historians debate the influence of the Caucus, and sometimes even its existence, because little was written about it before 1740 due to its secrecy.⁶⁰ Regardless, the organization seems to have converted political tavern-talk into mobilized political action. Thus, the Boston Caucus served as a catalyst for American nationalist thought. Historian David W. Conroy argues that Cooke was likely the reason for some of the drastic changes that occurred in Massachusetts voting patterns in the 1690s. In 1698, more votes were submitted in the Boston town election than there were taxpayers, and Cooke was accused of vote fraud. He and the Caucus were active mobilizers in taverns and had been gaining votes through bribery. In the 1720s, for example, he spent about nine thousand pounds worth of sterling on alcohol to distribute in exchange for votes.⁶¹ Cooke also gained voter partisanship by increasing tavern licenses in Boston. This meant that

⁵⁸ Benjamin Franklin. *Autobiography*, Part 12. Franklinpapers.org

⁵⁹ Conroy. *In Public Houses; Drink and Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts*, 158.

⁶⁰ Conroy. *In Public Houses; Drink and Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts*, 169.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 169., and Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 87.

alcohol would be less expensive, more taverns would host political discussions, and tavern-goers would boast positively of Cooke while enjoying their beverages.⁶² Cooke's political endeavours thrived due to his strategic use of Boston taverns, and his example testifies to evolving American nationalism in tavern political culture.

Another significant anti-monarchical aspect of early American taverns was the consumption of non-alcoholic beverages, specifically coffee. Coffee was promoted in the later eighteenth century to contribute to the success of the British East India Company tea boycott. For this reason, historian William G. Clarence-Smith calls coffee a "revolutionary beverage."⁶³ Taverns promoted the boycott through the popularization of coffee as a substitute good within public houses, and coffeehouses helps to explain how the revolutionary Boston Tea Party of 1773 gained mass support before the American Revolution.⁶⁴ The prominence of coffee in taverns is another reason why these institutions became the headquarters of American nationalism. They outwardly promoted an American identity.

Aside from to economic and social aspects of New England public houses, American nationalism expanded most significantly through the political discourse that brewed within them. In the public social sphere, citizens could assemble with varying political ideas and begin to share radical and anti-monarchical sentiments that led to political activism and foreshadowed the American Revolution.

CONCLUSION

Taverns, or public houses, in colonial New England contributed to the genesis of American nationalism because of their usage for distinctive economic, social, and political change. Taverns were central to America's networking in the international economy, and promoted the growth of domestic trade. They were also institutions that encouraged expanding knowledge, art, and entertainment in American social culture. In addition, taverns were the place where seeds of the American Revolution were planted. New England eventually developed a distinctive national identity from the British with the help of the taverns established there. For this reason, they remain historic monuments on the northeastern coast.

⁶² Conroy. *In Public Houses; Drink and Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts*, 172.

⁶³ William Clarence-Smith. 'The global consumption of hot beverages, c. 1500 to c. 1900.' In: Nützenadel, Alexander and Trentmann, Frank, (eds.), *Food and globalization: consumption, markets and politics in the modern world*. (Oxford: Berg,) 46.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

To broaden their significance into a later period, taverns continued to operate during the American Revolution for the reasons previously discussed, but most notably for their political uses. Some taverns exclusively served Loyalists and boarded their soldiers, while some only served patriots and encouraged their mobilization. Pamphlets were distributed in taverns, and spies were sent to them for investigations. They became small, yet highly significant headquarters for a dividing America.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Benjamin L. Carp, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.