An Irredeemable Bostonian

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While walking through the city of Boston’s center I have taken note that some of Boston’s seemingly upper-class conservative families continue to reside in the city’s historic buildings, while others opt for modern edifices constructed with non-traditional materials—distinguishing themselves from their conservative counterparts. Undeterred by the stark contrast between old and new, I imagined my life, if only for a few seconds, as a Bostonian during the eighteenth century.

I was born on May 10, 1795 in Boston, Massachusetts to a family of merchants or commercial shippers who conducted trade principally with the British West Indies, Canada and the Southern European countries of Spain, Portugal and Italy. Growing up as a Puritan¹, I recall during my youth I assisted with household chores which included the gathering of sufficient wood to ensure our family home was adequately warm during the cold winter months. Also, during the summer months I assisted my father with careening² our ships to ensure they were seaworthy. In addition, my family owned fields which were used to cultivate crops. As a child, I recall my father repeatedly stating that growing crops in New England was most challenging, as soil was rocky, the temperature during the winter was intensely cold and the summers were mild (Nussbaum Education Network, 2015). Furthermore, my father often remarked that the cold months started earlier here than in England, implying the growing seasons were shorter (Nussbaum Education Network, 2015). I presume these challenges contributed, in part, to why fishing and the eating of codfish became a main staple of our existence (Nussbaum Education Network, 2015). Nonetheless, I do not have a fond memory of the food I ate as a child, leading me to think the food was not very palatable, acknowledging, however, I would not have survived without it.

My father and mother were most concerned with my education, as a lack of education could be conceived as Satan attempting to prevent me from acquiring knowledge of the sacred writings of Christianity. Between six and eight years of age I learned how to read, spell and acquired knowledge of daily prayers. A hornbook, as pictured on the left, was used during the initial lessons I was given. The hornbook used for my lessons displayed the alphabet and religious information. Subsequent to the use of the hornbook, I was educated with the New England Primer³ and the Blue Back Speller⁴. Although the New England Primer was practically superseded by the Blue Back Speller, my parents, however, insisted I also be educated with the New England Primer.

¹ A Puritan can be described as belonging to a group of people who were discontent with the Church of England and who sought social and religious reforms. Furthermore, it can be presumed that many Puritans held the belief the Church was outside the limits of reform.
² Careening refers to turning a ship on its side for cleaning and or repair.
³ The New England Primer was an educational textbook that was a reprint of the English Protestant Tutor with a revised title, namely the New England Primer.
⁴ The New England Primer was superseded by Noah Webster’s Blue Back Speller after 1790.
Religion, or more precisely religious persecution, was a preeminent factor motivating my ancestors to flee from England. My ancestors were referred to as dissenters, implying they (my ancestors) refused to partake in the Church of England, the dominant church at the time of my ancestors fleeing. According to Cody (2014), the persecution of religious fractions continued in England up until the Toleration Act in 1690 which allowed dissenters to meet formally. A related point worth mentioning is the Blasphemy Act of 1698 in England which required belief in the Trinity, failure to do so would result in imprisonment (Smitha, 2015). Nonetheless, by the time the Toleration Act came into effect, my ancestors were already early settlers in the New England colonies. After completing initial lessons, I attended the Boston Latin School, attributed we were not landed gentry.

As a lad I once asked my father to describe what our life was like when I was young. He immediately commenced with an account of the Embargo Act of 1807 which was approved by President Thomas Jefferson, prohibiting American ships from trading in all foreign ports (Sofka, 2007). Concisely, the single element of the Act that impacted our business and lives was that which precluded us (my family and I) from obtaining clearance to undertake voyages to foreign ports or places (Online Highways, n.d.). According to my father, this Act did little more than undermine income for our subsistence, noting the areas most affected were New England and Middle Atlantic States (Enacademic, 2017). Specifically, the Act targeted the commercial centers in New England which we were a part of. My father and I were staunch supporters of the Federalist Party, which opposed the Democratic-Republican Party in America, led by President Thomas Jefferson (Foner and Garraty, 1991). In our mind and that of our peers, it was the Democratic-Republican Party that favored the Embargo Act—the cause of our suffering. Concisely, my father and I favored war over economic retaliation against the British. Moreover, I, among other Federalists, held the viewpoint the Embargo Act weakened American’s faith in their government to rule effectively and efficiently. However, it is important to note that my opinion at that time may have been influenced more by opponents of the Embargo such as the Governor of Massachusetts—James Sullivan and the Secretary of the Treasury—Albert Gallatin than by actual experience (Sofka, 2007). As a point of clarity, in subsequent years my viewpoint changed. I have come to understand the Embargo Act of 1807 was the successor to the Non-Importation Act of 1806 which was implemented to deter Britain from its policy of impressment of American sailors on the high seas (Sofka, 2007a). I would like to note that the British navy regularly “patrolled the eastern US coast and frequently intercepted American vessels, conducted searches and seizures, confiscated ships, cargo, and other property” (Irwin, 2005, p. 632).

Nonetheless, I am embarrassed to share that my father and I were relentless to succumb to lower revenues from decreased trade which, in turn, contributed to our decision to continuing trading regardless of the embargo. In other words, we were smugglers and took all precautions

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5 Landed gentry referred to a British social class comprised largely of landowners.
6 The Embargo Act of 1807 superseded the Nonimportation Act of 1806 which represented a nonviolent attempt of the U.S. to coerce the British from imprisoning American Sailors. In brief, the Nonimportation Act forbade the importation of specified British items.
7 Impressment refers to forcing a national of a country to serve in an army or navy of another nation.
to conceal our contraband after departing from Boston Harbor and occasionally Gloucester harbor. In retrospect, I suspect our (my father and my) decision to continue working as smugglers is related, in part, to our protestant work ethic, our belief that hard work was an honor to God (Kizer, n.d.). I presume, at this point, I should clarify the goods I smuggled. Well, I smuggled lumber, dried cod fish, Indian corn and meal (Jennings, 1921). On occasion, depending on the season, I also smuggled peas and beans and other items (Jennings, 1921). Specifically, I transferred the aforementioned items to the British West Indies and occasionally to Southern Europe, where I was able to obtain a respectable selling price which contributed to my prosperity. While in the British West Indies, I used a portion of the money from the sale of my items to purchase sugar or its liquid form—molasses. The molasses was transported back to New England where it was resold and distilled into rum. I would, on occasion, trade the rum with British merchants for finished products which I would, in turn, bring to New England and resell. Additionally, I acquired slaves from the British West Indies and transported these individuals to the U.S. where I sold them to intermediaries, who in turn, sold the slaves to Southern plantation owners for a sizeable profit. For these long excursions I employed both two-masted (brigs) and three masted ships which weighted 400 to 600 tons, allowing me to transport sufficient quantities (Bass, 1988). Additionally, the aforementioned ships were transformed into faster vessels such as the Baltimore Clippers which were quite fast, allowing me to escape from government authorities seeking to enforce the embargo.

While I focused on trade with the West Indies, my father concentrated on coastal trade with Canada. He utilized schooners which were more weatherly and required smaller crews (Bass, 1988). My father invested family resources in acquiring Newfoundland cod which was dried and became a great export staple for the portion of the family business I managed between Boston, the British West Indies and the Southern European countries of Spain, Portugal and Italy (Higgins, 2007).

As an elderly person, I have had the time to reflect on important occurrences which have transpired during my life. One matter, in particular, I have reflected on relates to the consequences of the Embargo Act of 1807. As cited above, my father and I were adamantly opposed to the Act and its predecessor, namely the Nonimportation Act. However, from another perspective, these Acts contributed to lessening the degree of dependence on Britain, as the U.S. began producing some manufactured items which were typically imported (Kokemuller, 2018). Additionally, another unintended consequence of these Acts can be described as an increase in unemployment. Moreover, the increase in unemployment coupled with the investment from my family and others has, presumably, contributed favorably to the industrial revolution. I am proud to have contributed to the industrialization of this country, the presumed betterment of its people and the degree of profit my family and I have earned which will continue to distinguish us from commoners. My actions and those of my family have led me to believe the end justifies the means—a reflection of an irredeemable Bostonian.
Literature Consulted


