THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY REVIEW

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From the Director

It is with great pleasure that the Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College, by special agreement with Bard College, begins publishing *The Hudson River Valley Review.* For many years, the journal was published by Bard under the expert editorial direction of Richard C. Wiles, David C. Pierce and William Wilson. The goal of the *Review* is much the same as in the past: to present the most recent scholarship on all aspects of the Hudson River Valley's unique history and culture. The *Review* will continue to publish issues twice a year, with one issue each year built around a special theme. This premier issue focuses on the American Revolution in the Hudson River Valley. Future special issues will be devoted to Hudson Valley architecture and the Hudson River School of art.

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Courtesy of New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

"The women! in this place have risen in a mob": Women Rioters and the American Revolution in the Hudson River Valley

Thomas S. Wermuth

Historians have long assessed the role of women as participants in pre-industrial riots. One of the most famous of these, of course, was the 1789 "March of the Fishwives" at the beginning of the French Revolution. The 1863 Confederate Bread Riots are another example. Less attention has been given to the role of women in American Revolutionary riots.[1] This essay examines the important role of Hudson Valley women in the crowd actions that characterized that era.

From the beginning of the war through the late 1770s, popular disturbances and crowd actions became a part of the social landscape in the Hudson Valley. Usually aimed at Tories, many of these actions were sanctioned, or at least tolerated, by the local governments or the popular committees that directed Revolutionary activities.

Crowd actions were not peculiar to the Revolutionary period, nor were they specific to this region. Indeed, as historians like Natalie Davis, George Rude, and E.P. Thompson have pointed out, mass disturbances and riots were seen as acceptable resolutions to a community's social or economic problems in the early modern period.[2] Throughout the eighteenth century, crowds engaged in popular action served as quasi-official forces, sometimes with authority delegated by local governments, sometimes without. For example, in 1740 a Kingston "delegation" investigating an ongoing boundary dispute between Johannis Wynkoop and Christian Nedick was given the authority to "pull down his Fence" if "Wynkoop did not comply w/the proposition they make to him." Others who threatened community standards, such as monopolizers or prostitutes, were threatened with "skimmington rides" and "charivaris" in Poughkeepsie, while residents representing more dangerous threats in Kingston and Saugerties witnessed the destruction of their property.[3]

These actions conform to the model described by historians of popular protest: a group of community residents act with "quasi-official" authority to address

William Hogarth's depiction of a riot in eighteenth-century England

and redress a problem threatening their town or village. Classic examples of this in early America include crowds harassing price-gouging merchants, press gangs, or prostitutes.[4]

The number of such crowd actions increased substantially during the American Revolutionary period. This was true for several reasons. First, the official government was in disarray, leading townsfolk to take matters into their own hands more frequently than would have been the case under normal conditions. Second, the Revolution created a series of problems and threats—political, social, and economic—that had not existed earlier and that needed speedy resolution, and which official authorities seemed unable to resolve.

Some of the crowd actions were clearly political, as with the arrest of Loyalist Cadwallader Colden Jr., son of the former acting governor, at his home near Newburgh. Acting on the authority of the local Committee of Safety, a "delegation" stormed his estate at midnight on June 21, 1776. The group searched and ransacked his house and ordered him arrested. Although the raiding party threatened him with the humiliating possibility that he would "be rode upon a rail" to the local jail if he did not accompany them willingly (a punishment traditionally reserved for prostitutes, wife abusers, or other community miscreants), he was ultimately arrested far less dramatically. Nevertheless, to threaten one of the most substantial men in the mid-Valley with such a fate—and Colden's apparent belief that the committee would make good on their threat—reveals the extent of the challenge to the existing social and political order.[5]

Shortly before the British invasion of New York City, crowds there seized Tories, rode them on rails, and stripped them of their clothes. In Albany, crowds made suspected Loyalists run a gauntlet, beating them as they ran.[6] Riots of this nature, aimed primarily at Tories, continued throughout the war.

Many other popular disturbances were not so well coordinated with local authorities and were aimed, not at Loyalists, but at resolving social and economic threats to the community. It is important to keep in mind the social and economic context in which these riots occurred. The day-to-day workings of village economies in the Hudson Valley were not left to the vagaries of the free market. Local town governments, as well as New York provincial authorities, enforced formal legislation or exerted informal community pressures that sought to encourage neighborly behavior and discourage any economic actions that might threaten the corporate body of the community. Old medieval injunctions against forestalling (withholding goods from the market in order to drive up prices) and engrossment (the monopolization of products destined for markets) remained on the law books throughout New York, although before the American Revolution they were irregularly enforced.[7]

Regulation of the local economy relied heavily on the force of community tradition. Where informal means proved insufficient, responsibility for balancing competing economic interests fell to the local governing boards. These policies generally reflected the communities' consensus of the primary importance of fostering a healthy agricultural trade. Nevertheless, local regulations—whether of prices, trading practices, or quality standards—were shaped as much by broad community concerns as by a desire to protect the interests of producers.

The government regulation that began with the original acts of incorporation in the seventeenth century carried into the early nineteenth. The charter of Kingston called for a public market, eventually located at Hendrick Sleght's, where the weights and measures were inspected, sellers and butchers licensed, financial exchanges supervised, flour and meat routinely inspected, and prices on various goods capped.[8] The towns of New Paltz and New Windsor set maximum prices on bread and salt, among other goods, and scrutinized wages as well. The regulation of prices and quality of goods continued well into the early nineteenth century in Kingston and Poughkeepsie, where the "assize of bread" was regularly posted. The assize listed the price and size of the normal loaf, and set these prices according to the price of local flour. It also ordered that "each loaf shall be marked with the initials of the Christian and surname of the baker."[9]

The Corporation of Kingston also kept wheat on hand in the common store for local use, with limits on the amount one could purchase, a ceiling on prices,

and instructions for its use. This wheat, rye, and "indian corn" was sold at a further reduced rate to poorer residents, so long as it was to be used "for Bread" and not sold.[10] The trustees also regulated interest rates for money put out on loan, with six percent the maximum allowed to be charged within the town. Additionally, no more than five percent could be charged to the town's poor or to freeholders, but seven percent could be "Lett out upon Interest out of the Corporation." The trustees also lent money, usually to the poor or freeholders. However, the corporation mandated that "such persons as are able to let money out themselves, shall not have it unless they pay 8%."[11]

Thus social settings, personal relations, family and personal reputation, and even economic needs and demands that could not be met through commercial markets helped determine proper economic behavior.

During the economic crisis of the Revolution, shortages of necessary items (particularly bread and salt) were blamed on "ingrossing jockies," and high prices were believed to be the work of price-gouging merchants. As early as 1776, residents of Kingston and New Windsor took matters into their own hands when they felt that their elected officials were not going far enough in regulating the economy and prosecuting monopolizers.[12] The Ulster County Committee reported in 1776 that "we are daily alarmed, and our streets filled with mobs." According to the committee, the situation had grown so desperate in Ulster that if the legislature could not solve the economic woes affecting the central valley, local committees would have to assume authority in the name "of the People at Large."[13] Kingston's Johannes Sleght appealed to the Provincial Congress for help, declaring that "mobs" were "breaking of doors, and committing of outrages."[14]

The years 1776 through 1779 witnessed regular boycotts, forced sales of necessary products, and riots in the mid-Hudson Valley. Many of the participants in these riots were women. The first of these occurred in Kingston in November 1776, when a crowd raided warehouses and stores, seizing tea. Two weeks later, one of Orange county's first families, the Ellisons of New Windsor, were the victims of a riot. A large crowd, composed of both men and women, came to William Ellison's store, and after accusing him of price-gouging and engrossment, it seized all the salt "except one bushel," which it left for the use of his family.[15]

Poughkeepsie-area shopkeeper Peter Messier suffered a crowd action in early 1777. Claiming that he was selling tea above the Poughkeepsie Committee's imposed price-cap, a crowd of women used their own weights and measures to weigh and distribute the tea among themselves. The women, accompanied by two Continental soldiers, offered Messier "their own price," which was considerably lower than his selling price.[16] The women returned twice more over the next

several days to repeat these actions.

Two Albany merchants who had purchased tea in Philadelphia had the misfortune of sending it overland through New Windsor in 1777. A crowd of both "men and women" besieged the transporters and seized the load, asserting that it was being marketed at a higher price than the six-shilling limit set by the local committee. They then sold it to themselves at that price.

The New Windsor and Poughkeepsie riots reveal that the rioters drew upon the legitimacy of the local government in order to explain their own activities. The rioters at Ellison's store reminded the shopkeeper of the committee's price regulations, which he was allegedly breaking. The women who confiscated Messier's tea specifically stated that "they had orders from the Committee to search his house." However, it is important to point out that in each of these actions, the rioters exceeded the committee's dictates. Neither riot was authorized by the local authorities.[17]

The actions of the rioters in seizing foodstuffs reveal traditional economic beliefs that denied the role of an unregulated market during times of economic crisis. Further, these rioters questioned the very essence of private property when they seized goods, making clear their belief that a shopkeeper was not the only person who could decide what to do with his or her merchandise, and that the community had a legitimate voice in its distribution. What is remarkable is that during the Revolutionary War, these beliefs and activities became associated, even synonymous, with patriotic behavior. Those who participated in the riots claimed that by their actions they were revealing their loyalty to the cause, while their targets, such as William Ellison, were exhibiting signs of Toryism.[18]

Also remarkable is that many of the rioters were women, who had no public or political role in the mid-Valley at this time, for voting, jury duty, and even unlimited control over property were denied to them. However, during the Revolution, women often took the lead in Hudson Valley riots. It was a crowd of women, for example, who first confronted New Windsor shopkeeper Mrs. Lawrence in 1777 for price-gouging, and by so doing forced the committee to act. At another riot in New Windsor, a local observer complained to a tea merchant that "the women! in this place have risen in a mob, and are now selling a box of tea of yours [the owner] at 6s per lb." A store in Fishkill was raided by female relatives of the owner.[19]

The action of women in relation to economic controls was not limited only to seizures and crowd action. Women also made it clear that they would use their power as wives and mothers to halt the war effort if certain measures were not taken to regulate the economy. In August 1776, the women of Kingston sur-

rounded the chambers of the Committee of Safety and demanded that if the food shortages were not resolved, "their husbands and sons shall fight no more."[20] In this way, these riots were not only protests against the economy; they had clear political implications as well. The site of the women's action was not the Kingston public market, nor a shopkeeper's warehouse, but the meeting house of the town's political authorities. It was not simply a symbolic location for the women to make their statement: it was the place where policy-makers met. And far from making threats of boycotts or disruptions, these women were warning of political action if their demands were not met.

Women tended to exert a public voice around those issues in which the needs of the domestic sphere crossed those of the public. The ability to get salt, tea, or flour at good prices fell firmly within the socially and culturally constructed gender roles of eighteenth-century America. Like their counterparts in the French Revolution, women's political action usually formed around issues of family and domestic concerns, particularly food and supplies.[21]

Generally, historians have agreed that women's participation in bread and food riots was based on their socially constructed gender roles as being responsible for providing food for their children. Also, as Natalie Davis has suggested for early modern France, women's participation could be excused by the fact that they were not viewed as responsible for their actions, and therefore could not be held accountable for their behavior. Since a riot was, at best, of questionable legality, those with limited legal and political roles could not be held fully responsible. English officials complained during the 1605 enclosure riots that women were "hiding behind their sex."[22]

Nevertheless, as E.P. Thompson has pointed out, women were primarily responsible for marketing, most sensitive to price fluctuations, and more likely to detect irregularities in sales or inferior products.[23] Women, therefore, would probably detect subtle price changes or questionable marketing practices and were more likely to act on them.

The involvement of women in food riots reveals a level of public participation often overlooked by traditional histories of the American Revolution. Although women did not actively take part on the battlefield, they were involved in important economic decisions concerning the just allocation and availability of goods at affordable prices. Further, their actions had clear political significance: when they could not obtain the necessary goods and items for the home, they threatened the ability of authorities to wage war. In this way, the actions of women-led crowds were not peripheral to the Revolution, but must be seen as an important component of wartime activities.

Notes

1. For a useful corrective, see Barbara Clark Smith, "Food Riots and the American Revolution," *William & Mary Quarterly* (1994), 3-30.
2. Natalie Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), 102-5; George Rude, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York, 1980), 27-37; E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York, 1993), 185-89.
3. "Kingston Trustees Minutes," May 14, 1740; 1721.
4. Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 77-78; Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760-1790* (Baltimore, 1981), 37-45.
5. Cadwallader Colden Jr. to Ulster County Committee, June 27, 1776, in Force, *American Archives* 6:1112
6. Countryman, 170.
7. *Ibid*., 56-59.
8. "Kingston Trustees Minutes," July 27, 1753, describes the market at Hendrick Sleght's. Petrus Smedes was appointed the "first manager of the market." See "Kingston Trustees Minutes," Oct. 19, 1753 and Jan. 29, 1790, Ulster County Clerk's Office, for various aspects of market supervision.
9. "Kingston Trustees Minutes," Apr. 12, 1779, U.C.C.O.; "Kingston Directors Minutes," Apr. 20, 1807, and May 14, 1819, Kingston City Hall; Edmund Platt, *The Eagle's History of Poughkeepsie*, 1683-1905 (Republished by Dutchess County Historical Society, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1987), 75.
10. For price ceilings on corporation wheat, see "Kingston Trustees Minutes," Mar. 22, 1772; Feb. 6, 1785; Jan. 29, 1790. For restrictions on its use, see Feb. 19, 1790, U.C.C.O.
11. For regulation of usury see "Kingston Trustees Minutes," Mar. 2, 1728, New-York Historical Society. This rate was reduced to five percent in 1750, but raised back to six percent in 1752. "Kingston Trustees Minutes," Dec. 10, 1750; Nov. 8, 1752, U.C.C.O. "Trustees Minutes," Mar. 2, 1728, NYHS.
12. "Henry Ludington to New York Council of Safety, Dec. 3, 1776," Journals of the Provincial Congress, 2:355.
13. "Ulster County Committee to New York Convention," Nov. 18, 1776, *Journals of the Provincial Congress*, 2:229-30.
14. Clark Smith, "Food Riots and the American Revolution," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 15.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Correspondence of John Hathorn, Dec. 2, 1776 in Ruttenber, *History of New Windsor*, 67-68; Countryman, 183.
17. Correspondence of John Hathorn, Dec. 2, 1776 in Ruttenber, *History of New Windsor*, 67.
18. For a discussion of the political implications of Revolutionary rioting, see Clark Smith, 5-12. For suspicions that Ellison was unpatriotic because of his economic dealings, see "Boyd to Clinton, July 3, 1776," *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 10 vols. (Albany, 1899-1914), 1:244-47.
19. "James H. Kip to James Caldwell, New Windsor, July 14, 1777," *Journals of the Provincial Congress*, 506; Clark Smith.
20. New York Convention Proceedings, Aug. 1776, in *American Archives*, 5th Series, 1:1542-43.
21. Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York, 1980), 44.
22. Davis, 146
23. Thompson, 234.