

by Francis Bernard, 1765

The following account of the riots by Francis Bernard, governor of Massachusetts, was prepared for the Earl of Halifax on August 31, 1765.

It is with the utmost concern that I am obliged to continue the subject of my last letters of the 15th and 16th and of the 22nd instant; the disorders of the town having been carried to much greater lengths than what I have before informed Your Lordship of.

After the demolition of Mr. Oliver's house was found so practicable and easy that the government was obliged to look on without being able to take any one step to prevent it, and the principal people of the town publicly avowed and justified the act, the mob, both great and small, became highly elated, and all kinds of ill humors were set on float. Everything that for years past had been the cause of any popular discontent was revived and private resentments against persons in office worked themselves in and endeavored to execute themselves under the mask of the public cause...

On Monday, August 26, there was some small rumor that mischief would be done that night, but it was in general disregarded. Toward evening some boys began to light a bonfire before the Town House, which is a usual signal for a mob. Before it was quite dark a great company of people gathered together crying liberty and property, which is the usual notice of their intention to plunder and pull down a house. They first went to Mr. Paxton's house (who is marshal of the Court of Admiralty and surveyor of the port), and finding before it the owner of the house (Mr. Paxton being only a tenant), he assured them that Mr. Paxton had quitted the house with his best effects; that the house was his; that he had never injured them; and finally invited them to go to the tavern and drink a barrel of punch. The offer was accepted and so that house was saved. As soon as they had drunk the punch, they went to the house of Mr. Story, registrar deputed of the Admiralty, broke into it and tore it all to pieces; and took out all the books and papers, among which

were all the records of the Court of Admiralty, and carried them to the bonfire and there burned them. They also looked about for him with an intention to kill him. From thence they went to Mr. Hallowell's, comptroller of the customs, broke into his house and destroyed and carried off everything of value, with about £ 30 sterling in cash. This house was lately built by himself and fitted and furnished with great elegance. But the grand mischief of all was to come.

The lieutenant governor (Thomas Hutchinson) had been apprised that there was an evil spirit gone forth against him, but being conscious that he had not in the least deserved to be made a party in regard to the Stamp Act or the Custom House, he rested in full security that the mob would not attack him, and he was at supper with his family when he received advice that the mob were coming to him. He immediately sent away his children and determined to stay in the house himself, but happily his eldest daughter returned and declared she would not stir from the house unless he went with her; by which means she got him away, which was undoubtedly the occasion of saving his life. For as soon as the mob had got into the house, with a most irresistible fury they immediately looked about for him to murder him, and even made diligent inquiry whither he was gone. They went to work with a rage scarce to be exemplified by the most savage people. Everything movable was destroyed in the most minute manner except such things of value as were worth carrying off, among which was near £ 1,000 sterling in specie, besides a great quantity of family plate, etc....

As for the house, which from its structure and inside finishing seemed to be from a design of Inigo Jones or his successor, it appears that they were a long while resolved to level to the ground. They worked for three hours at the cupola before they could get it down, and they uncovered part of the roof; but I suppose that the thickness of the walls which were of very fine brickwork, adorned with Ionic pilasters worked into the wall, prevented their completing their purpose though they worked at it till daylight. The next day the streets were found scattered with money,

plate, gold rings, etc., which had been dropped in carrying off. The whole loss in this house only is reckoned at £ 3,000 sterling.

As soon as I received advice of this at the Castle, I immediately sent an order to the secretary to summon a Council at Cambridge early in the afternoon, not thinking Boston a safe place to sit at. As I was going thither, on the road I received a letter from the secretary desiring that I would hold the Council in Boston; for that this affair had given such a turn to the town that all the gentlemen in the place were ready to support the government in detecting and punishing the actors in the last horrid scene, and there was a town meeting appointed to testify their abhorrence of it. I accordingly went to the Council and there issued orders to the colonel of the regiment of militia, the captain of the company of cadet guards, the captains of the batteries and of the companies of militia in Charles Town, Cambridge, and Roxbury to raise their several corps and make detachments therefrom to keep a constant guard. And I recommended to the gentlemen of the town who were excused from military duty to enroll themselves as volunteers in some of the corps, many of which did, especially in the cadets, which were doubled upon this occasion; to whom I assigned the guard of the Custom House where there were several thousand £ of the King's money.

And these measures were but just taken in time for otherwise a much greater mischief would have happened the second night than the former. For, it seems, the mob had set down no less than fifteen houses in or near the town to be attacked the next night, among which was the Custom House and the houses of some of the most respectable persons in the government. It was now becoming a war of plunder, of general leveling and taking away the distinction of rich and poor so that those gentlemen who had promoted and approved the cruel treatment of Mr. Oliver became now as fearful for themselves as the most loyal person in the town could be. They found, as I told some of them, that they had raised the devil and could not lay him again. However, by means of the military guards the town was kept quiet that night without anything

happening except that the cadets were obliged once to present their pieces, but did not fire.

After I had established these guards, which took up all that day, I considered whether it would not be proper to call in assistance from without. By an instruction I am directed to have the advice of Council whenever I call for military aid. I knew that the Council would never advise me to call in the King's troops in cases more desperate than this. Their own situation and dependence would make them afraid of being answerable to the people for so disagreeable a step. I therefore put the question whether it was expedient to advertise General Gage and Lord Colville of what had happened at Boston. But they advised in the negative, saying that such advertisement would amount to a tacit request for forces; and though they expected such forces would be ordered hither some time or other, they would not help to bring them here nor hasten them before their time.

I therefore transmitted to General Gage a copy of this resolution of Council, copies of my proclamations, with advice of the intention of lodging the stamps in the Castle, and augmenting the garrison for that purpose; from all which he will see the restraints I am under. I then acquainted the Council with the various reports I had heard of the Castle being threatened if the stamps were put in there, represented the present state of garrison, and proposed that an independent company should be raised for augmenting the garrison, which they readily came into, and I immediately dispatched orders for that purpose. I am also by all means in my power strengthening the Castle so that if I can get the reinforcement here in time, I shan't be afraid for the Castle against any number, though I cannot think that any people will be desperate enough to attack it, notwithstanding what has been given out.

When first the town took this new turn, I was in hopes that they would have disavowed all the riotous proceedings, that of the first night as well as the last. But it is no such thing: great pains are taken to separate the two riots; what was done against Mr. Oliver is still approved of as a

necessary declaration of their resolution not to submit to the Stamp Act; and even the cruel treatment of him and his family is justified by its consequences - the frightening him into a resignation. And it has been publicly hinted that if a line is not drawn between the first riot and the last, the civil power will not be supported by the principal people of the town, as it is assured it shall be now. And indeed, if the last riot had been the only one, the civil government would appear to be in full power. Many people concerned in the last riot are daily taken up and committed to jail, where a constant guard is kept by the militia, and the town cries aloud for some of them to be made examples of. And yet if one was to offer to take one of the persons concerned in the first riot only, things would again be flung into confusion and the civil power would become as weak as ever. So that the present authority of the government is only exercised upon condition and with prescribed limitations.

It seems therefore that the horror of this last affair has not at all abated the spirit of the people against the Stamp Act. I am again and again assured that this town and country about it (how far deep I can't say) are as resolute as ever to oppose the execution of the Stamp Act and to suffer the utmost extremities rather than submit to it. There are but two things which are like to produce a change in these resolutions: the one is a nearer and fuller prospect of the anarchy and confusion which must take place when the courts of justice and public offices are shut up, as they must be on November 1 unless stamps are allowed to be used. These must necessarily alarm all serious people and especially those who have much property. The other is the meeting of the Assembly, which I believe I shall be obliged to call at the time it is prorogued to, September 25, though I could have wished that it might have been postponed till I could have received orders from England.

I should have much dependence upon the prudence of the Assembly in common cases, but I know not how to expect that they will act against the voice of the people, if it is such as I am told it is. On the other hand, they must be greatly staggered when they are called upon to assist the execution of an act of Parliament which is opposed by violence. Hitherto

the opposition is chargeable upon private persons only; it will then be adopted by the legislature, and if that should fail in so important a duty, they must expect that a forfeiture of their rights will be the consequence. If these two causes - the apprehension of confusion when all business shall cease, and the prudence, or what is the same, the fear of the Assembly - should cooperate together, it is possible that the act may be yet carried into execution at its day. I shall watch every opportunity and improve every incident to produce so happy an event.

I labor under many difficulties, and none more than that the Council, which I have to advise with, is composed almost wholly of gentlemen whose connections and properties are in Boston. They that live out of Boston will not come in; I have but two or three such since the last riot and I have known some that have been afraid to come to Boston. By these means nothing can pass the Council that is likely to be displeasing to Boston; expedients are thereby rendered very few and spirited measures are quite impracticable. I submitted to the Council whether it would not be best to call the Assembly at a distance from Boston, that it might sit free from intimidation or undue influence: it passed in the negative. I then asked if I should call a general council by summoning every member to meet at Cambridge, and I urged that several members, naming them, objected to coming to Boston: it passed in the negative. I then proposed calling such general council at Boston, which was approved of, and it is appointed for Thursday next, September 5. It is true that I can without advice of Council call the Assembly and the Council to what place I please, but it is the business of the Council, among other things, to guard the governor against popular odium from his taking unpopular measures necessary to government by concurring with him and advising such measures; and when they refuse so to do, it would be dangerous as well as impolitic for the governor to expose himself solely to the resentment of the people by acting without or contrary to the advice of Council.

I must, however, add that it is become now much safer to meet at Boston than it was a week ago. The town is now become as quiet as ever it was,

and the principal gentlemen have desired me, who have of late slept in the Castle, although I have been in town almost every day, and sometimes all day long, to live more at the Province House, assuring me that I shall have a guard of what number of gentlemen I please; and I shall go to the Province House on Monday and stay there some days, to show that I don't keep out of the town for fear of it. There will therefore remain only the objection to the Assembly's meeting at Boston upon account of undue influence, which I own has considerable weight with me; though perhaps it may not have so much weight with the Council, by whom I must be determined concerning the sitting of the Assembly.