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COMMUNITY, CULTURE and IDENTITY in an AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

KATIE WIGGINS

As we move further into the age of globalization, we are seeing changes not only at a global level but at individual and communal levels; changes that we cannot wholly identify but that we recognize in ourselves. We are adapting to a global world, one that is affecting our identity and culture and, as we attempt to hold on to this identity and still converse with a larger world, we ultimately are forced to reshape our identities. Some may wonder what this will mean for the future and to what extent it affects us as individuals and communities. To answer this, I argue that we can use our own history to better understand the world around us, even in a time of shifting ideas and global changes.

The American Revolution was a period of profound change for colonists in New England. The 18th century was rife with conflict, expansion and global immersion for New Englanders and it forced small scale communities to interact with a larger world in new ways. The small immediate community was the most important structure for the colonial Americans and was ultimately a significant motivator for joining in the Revolution. The colonists participated in the Revolution to protect their local autonomy and maintain their traditional communities through a revolution but, in doing so, they actively opened their community to a larger political entity and became a part of a larger network of communities, losing the same autonomy they originally fought for while shifting their concept of community and identity.

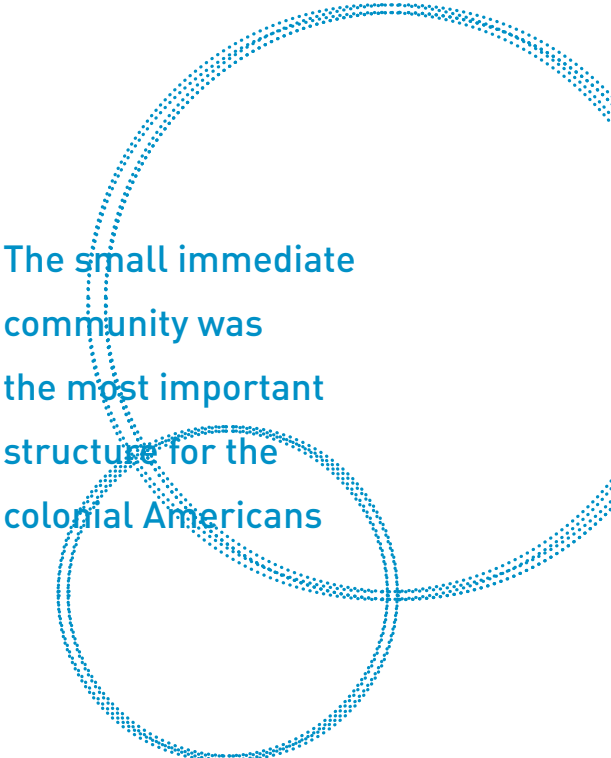
New England communities were largely influenced by the church and family. Piety was expected of every member of the community and was enforced by "moral surveillance." This surveillance was an expected activity by the minister and/or selectmen. This surveillance ensured the morality of the community by keeping social checks on individuals and families. This focus on morality and piety was an attempt to reach perfection and maintain unity within the town. Churches represented the highest authority within the town and dictated moral, social and political behavior.

New Englanders worked vigorously at maintaining a self-contained and sufficient community. To ensure that they met the needs of the entire community, they used town meetings as the primary means of government. These town meetings were the center of political power for the town, and kept power localized and focused on the community and communal needs. These meetings encouraged cooperation among the villagers and used spheres of influence to ensure that problems were being solved and consensus among villagers was reached. Most town meetings only discussed town problems, rarely integrating any larger colonial issues and "no political pretext existed for mobilization, or even communication, that cut across all the communities of the colony." These communities did not communicate with one another and rarely saw a reason to. Though the town meetings added a certain democratic aspect to the community, it kept the community closed as they could handle any internal problems within the town at these meetings and rarely

sought outside help as they simply did not need that help.

These communities operated on a cooperation and self- and community-policing approach to maintaining social order and. These communities were concerned with their local affairs and maintaining peace within their immediate community. We have seen how isolated and autonomous these communities were and we will now look at the conflicts the communities were facing before and during the Revolution that forced a shift in their community and culture.

As tensions began to build between Britain and the Colonies in the 1760s and 1770s, most communities were still relatively unconcerned with what was going on outside their borders: "opposition to British policies outside Boston was at best an intermittent event in the life of most towns. They preferred to be left alone."



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However, with the creation of the Boston Committee of Correspondence in 1772, Bostonians had a way of reaching some of these communities and make them aware of the growing problems between the colonists and the British-placed royal governors. In December of 1772, the small community of Concord, Massachusetts received their first letter from the Boston Committee of Correspondence detailing British grievances and their attempts to enslave the colonies. This alone may not have been enough to encourage Concord to join against Britain, but the Boston Committee of Correspondence continued to keep towns up-to-date on all of Britain's threats against the colonies and encourage communities to share their sentiments.

Soon, towns began to follow Boston's lead and make correspondence committees with the express purpose of communicating between the individual communities. With this new development, small communities were suddenly made aware of provincial politics and the growing problems with Britain. As these communities continued to reach out to one another, a steady network was being created among them. They were entering into a larger world, being introduced into, what they considered, global issues and their role in them. It came to their attention that in order to protect their own community, liberty and freedom, these communities

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would have to take an active role in this network. Britain's direct interference with town politics resonated within the communities and provided the push necessary to encourage large scale communication and cooperation among communities, even among rural communities previously uninterested in provincial politics.

The communities began to mobilize as they prepared for war. With this mobilization, communities made physical networks with warning systems designed to help protect the individual towns. The most notable example of this is probably Paul Revere and the "midnight riders" as they have been popularized. These communities relied on one another and were forced to cooperate in order to accomplish the larger goal of protecting their towns and autonomy. The known community grew larger as the colonists not only shifted their awareness to a larger scaled political entity, but they recognized the relative authority of that entity and cooperated within it to make a working system.

With the first shots of the war fired at Lexington and Concord, it became apparent, to both the British and the colonists, that this was a war that could and would be fought and that the colonists had a better chance of winning than previously imagined. The colonists' very way of life was being threatened, and they were willing to fight to secure their traditional society. The colonists joined the war efforts in order to maintain their community and their autonomy over their community. But Lexington and Concord were only the beginning of the war and the next eight years would pose challenges that would put different types of pressures on communities. These pressures would cause a shift from localized to centralized power; a shift that would change the very nature of the concept of community and open the colonist's minds to the idea of a broader community and their place within that community.

War changed how the communities and individuals within the community communicated. Large groups of men, both elite and non-elite, would leave the community to participate in the war and would return with a "worldly" experience that many would not have had before. Some

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traveled farther than others, though each would have been exposed to different individuals from different communities. War caused a shift in ideas of authority: men on the front lines formed their own community; one that tied them to the militia rather than their homes. “For the first time there was an American military force not tied by command, finance, or recruitment to a particular province or state,” these men became tied to one another; an identity was forged that was not a reflection of their original community. It was a new experience of community, of common identity through common experience. This was a new unifying experience that occurred at multiple levels of society. The elected (elites) would become part of a unified political culture, as they continually came together to coordinate the war and as members of the Continental Congress to discuss the war, how to win it, and how to govern the new United States. The ideas of community were constantly being challenged during the war, as New Englanders had to support a war that was taking place beyond their own borders and outside their individual interest as the war became too much to support.

War was incredibly damaging both economically and emotionally for the members of New England. The Revolution had a profound emotional impact on those involved and was, in many ways, traumatic. Throughout the years from 1775-1783, many people lost their homes, friends and family members to the war, and even those that did not lived in fear that they would. At the start of the war, many believed that the Revolution would be quick and decisive and that, after the war, everyone could return to their various ways of life. The New Englanders believed that the Revolution would not impact their communities, except to reinforce the authority

they already held at the local level. This was not to be the case. Instead, they were engaged in a war that lost popular support quickly and left people desirous of returning to their closed communities. However, as the war continued, New Englanders would find this task difficult to accomplish as they were becoming more dependent on this newly established network of communities and were continuing to integrate themselves further and further into “global” issues.

Economically, the war became more than the communities could handle. The American Revolution was disastrous and crippled the United States financially. It is estimated that the colonies did not return to their pre-Revolutionary economic prosperity until a quarter of a century after the War ended.

After the war ended, the economic problems were far from being solved. In some ways, in fact, they became worse still as debates over printing money and the inability to pay off loans left people with no money at all. Tensions began to rise within and between the States yet again as the small scale communities were unable to pay the state and the state was unable to pay the federal government for the costs of war. The need for one currency medium across the states and acceptance within the global economy were a necessity for America to pick themselves up financially. The standardization and unity across states became a necessity in order to pay off debts and keep conflict to a minimum. Now that these communities had begun working with one another, they had to realize that, in order for a community to work at

a larger scale, “the people must cede to it some of their natural rights in order to vest it with requisite powers.” With this standardization, the communities had to leave a part of their culture and autonomy behind to adopt a new political, economic and social order.

This cessation of power was only being realized towards the end of the 18th century as the people were being forced to acknowledge that their nation needed a government with authority capable of regulating the states and towns in order to provide practical solutions to the economic problems the new nation was facing. If the states were not regulated, there would be greater chaos and confusion. State conventions were called to solve the economic issues that could simply no longer be solved at the town level. The attrition of this local power was furthered by the creation and gradual acceptance of the Constitution. The Constitution established a strong central government with bureaucracy that served to separate the people from their government and the power they once held and was, in many ways, a betrayal of the local community’s original goal of maintaining local autonomy. This growing dependence on a larger network reinforced the idea that these were no longer small independent communities; rather they had become a part of a large scale group of interdependent, cooperating communities.

The latter half of the 18th century was a difficult time for New Englanders and became a period of challenging ideas and restructuring of community. Because of this period of conflict and trauma, some men chose never to come home. They began new lives in other, more urban, New England towns, integrating themselves

into a new community to better fit a new set of needs brought on by war and shifting ideas. The generations following the war continued to challenge the norms of their communities, searching new fields for employment as they arranged themselves in their new, broader world. In order to accomplish this, the members of the New England communities lost a part of their identity, a part of their culture.

New Englanders entered global politics to protect their local autonomy and their traditional communities, only to experience a small-scale globalization of the same communities they were attempting to protect from outside influence. Thomas Jefferson stated “these wards, called townships in New England, are the vital principle of their governments, and have proved themselves the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government, and for its preservation.” The local autonomy held by New England communities before the American Revolution and the Constitution was recognized by Jefferson as a brilliant institution, one that ultimately he would be disappointed to see disappear as the communities failed to maintain this local power.

As the relevant community grew larger, New Englanders were unable to determine a “public good” and provide for it because there were simply too many parties, too many voices involved in this larger world. With the beginning of the 19th century, New Englanders continued to open to this larger world, strengthening the communal network that began before the Revolution, and, as they did so, continued to change their own cultures and lose their traditional practices to meet the needs of the larger national community.

“One change always leaves the way open for the establishment of others.”

-Niccolo Machiavelli

Globalization, small or large scale, is a continual concern for many scholars and activists alike. This concern grows as we move further into the digital age; with social media and the ability to share information instantaneously we have been opened to a broader world that is continually getting smaller and smaller. The effects of this instant communication and integration with the world around us beg the question: While we become members of a large scale community, what bits of our identity, community and culture are we giving up? And perhaps, most importantly: can we ever get those bits back or are they forever changed or lost? Perhaps, for these answers, we need only look at our own past. ●

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