

Boston and New York in the Eighteenth Century

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MY TITLE was inspired by George Rudé's *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century*, though my concerns were not his. In the course of working on urban politics in the Revolutionary period I became aware of how remarkably different were Boston and New York—different not just in their people and politics but in feeling, in character, in that wonderfully all-encompassing thing called culture. Their differences were neither incidental nor ephemeral: to a remarkable extent the distinctive traits each city had developed by the end of the eighteenth century survived into the nineteenth and even the twentieth century. And so I propose to consider those differences, how they began and persisted over time, and their more general importance in American history.

Any such exercise assumes that the subjects of inquiry were comparable, that is, that they had some essential identity in common upon which distinctions were grafted. The existence of such a common identity for two early American ports on the Atlantic seaboard is in part obvious. But there remains a problem relevant to their comparability that is worth beginning with, one that has troubled me and, I suppose, other students of the period since first encountering Carl Bridenbaugh's path-breaking books *Cities in the Wilderness* and *Cities in Revolt*. That is, by what right do we classify together Boston, New York, and similar communities as 'cities' before 1800?

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Consider the gulf between Rudé's subjects and mine. He wrote about two of the greatest cities in the Western world, population centers that no one hesitates to call urban. Paris already had over a half million people in 1700. It grew only modestly over the next century, while London expanded at a quick pace—from 575,000 people in 1750 to almost 900,000 fifty years later. By contrast Boston's population stood at 6,700, New York's nearer 5,000 when the eighteenth century began. One hundred years later New York had over 60,000 and Boston almost 25,000 people.¹ It takes no very sophisticated statistical analysis to suggest that a 'city' of 6,700 was something very different from one of a half million, that New York at its eighteenth-century peak was still in many ways distinct from London, whose population was some fifteen times greater. If 'city' denotes a community's size, Boston and New York would not qualify.

The word 'city' has not, however, distinguished places by size so much as by function. Historically it designated independent communities that served as centers for a surrounding countryside and as points of contact with the outside world. The word derives from the Latin word *civitas*, which the Romans used, as it happens, for a colonial situation—for the separate states or tribes of Gaul, and then for their most important towns. There were also *civitates* in Roman Britain, but the Angles and Saxons used instead the word *burh* or *borough*, adopting *city* in the thirteenth century for foreign or ancient cities, for large indigenous communities such as London, and later for the chief boroughs of a diocese, those that became cathedral towns.²

¹ George Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1970), pp. 7, 35–36; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625–1742* (New York, 1964), p. 143n; Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790–1860* (New York, 1961), p. 49 (table 5).

² *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 (Oxford and London, 1961):443–45. I am here bypassing the narrow and more legalistic meaning the word assumed in North America, where it was applied to separately incorporated communities governed by the traditional English mayor and court of aldermen. Under that definition New York

Cities perform their centralizing function in many ways, most of which were exercised by Boston and New York. Like other major colonial cities, they were provincial capitals as well as important cultural centers where newspapers and pamphlets were published, discussed, and distributed. But above all they were commercial centers, Atlantic coastal ports where the produce of the countryside was collected and shipped to the West Indies, Africa, or Europe and exchanged for products or credits that could in turn be exchanged for goods of foreign origin needed by colonists in both city and country. Later cities became the merchandising centers for manufactures of either rural or urban origin, whose 'reach' and therefore whose volume of business grew with the development of more advanced transportation systems; they became the homes of banks, of insurance companies, of stock exchanges.³ As they did so, they drew upon the efforts of increasing numbers of people. But it was not the size of their populations that made them cities so much as the functions Boston and New York shared with Paris and London even when their people were counted in thousands, not tens or hundreds of thousands.

From the beginning, moreover, colonial cities had a cosmopolitan character that distinguished them from more rural towns, of whose people it could be said, as George Homans wrote of thirteenth-century English villagers, that they 'had

would have qualified as a city by 1686, when the Dongan Charter was issued, but Boston not until 1822. New York's Governor Bellomont seemed to work from that definition on November 29, 1700, when he wrote the Lords of Trade that the Dongon Charter was not legal because it was 'sealed with the Duke of Yorke's seal, and neither the Great Seal of England nor the Seal of the Province, yet it bears date the 2d year of King James, so that the whole foundation is wrong,' and therefore concluded that 'in strictness this is no City. . . .' In I. N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909* (New York, 1915-28), 4:427. The definition was not, however, respected in common usage. Boston was, for example, commonly referred to as a city in the eighteenth century, and by a man no less learned than Cotton Mather. See Samuel G. Drake, *The History and Antiquities of the City of Boston* (Boston, 1851), p. 569n.

³ For a still-useful treatment of urban economic development, see N. S. B. Gras, *An Introduction to Economic History* (New York and London, 1922), esp. ch. 5, pp. 181-269.

upon the whole more contact with one another than they had with outsiders.⁴ While their ships traded at ports-of-call in the Caribbean and the larger Atlantic world, the cities played host to numbers of transients or 'strangers,' whether in the laboring force or among the more substantial persons of affairs who found business to transact at Boston or New York. Already in the seventeenth century Boston merchants found themselves in conflict with their colony's Puritan leaders, whose effort to isolate Massachusetts from Old World contamination proved incompatible with the demands of commerce. 'The well-being of trade,' Bernard Bailyn has observed, 'demanded the free movement of people and goods.'⁵ In the end the merchants won, but their victory was never such as made Boston altogether hospitable to new immigrants, particularly those of non-English origin. Only the French Huguenots—the Faneuils, Bowdoins, Rivoires, and their like—found a welcome there and were easily assimilated.

New York's population was more diverse in origin, including persons of Dutch as well as of French and English origin along with lesser numbers of Germans, Irishmen, Jews, and other Europeans as well as substantial numbers of Africans. Manhattan and the nearby counties of Long Island had the largest concentration of blacks anywhere in North America above the plantation colonies. The city also absorbed substantial numbers of migrants from New England.⁶

The diversity of New York's peoples has, however, often been exaggerated, for they were, like Boston's people, predominantly Northern European Calvinists who shared, out of

⁴ Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), p. 403, cited in Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, 1978), p. 61.

⁵ Bailyn, *New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), pp. 105-6.

⁶ Robert V. Wells, *The Population of the British Colonies in America before 1776: A Survey of Census Data* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 114-15; Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1966), p. 25; and Gov. Robert Hunter, Aug. 11, 1720, in Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, 4:493.

diverse historical experiences, a militant hostility to 'papism' and to Catholic Absolutism in France and Spain. Even Manhattan's Sephardic Jews shared in some measure this 'Protestant' culture, for they had suffered from the same forces that the Dutch had fought in their long struggle for national independence—the Spanish monarchy and the Catholic Church.⁷ With people already so alike, the 'melting pot' could melt: by the mid-eighteenth century, Peter Kalm noted, younger persons of Dutch descent, particularly on Manhattan, spoke mostly English, attended the English church, 'and would even take it amiss if they were called Dutchmen and not Englishmen.' French Huguenots who first arrived at New York in the seventeenth century also gradually became Anglicans,⁸ helping to make the city by the late eighteenth century far more culturally unified than it had been one hundred years earlier or would be a century later, when Italian Catholics, the Ashkenazic Jews of

⁷ See Israel Goldstein, *A Century of Judaism in New York: B'Nai Jesburun 1825–1925, New York's Oldest Ashkenazic Congregation* (New York, 1930), p. 8. New York's eighteenth-century Jewish population was predominantly though, it seems, not entirely made up of Sephardic Jews. The diversity of New York's colonial population and of the Middle Colonies in general has been emphasized in a historical tradition that goes back to Frederick Jackson Turner. According to writers in that tradition, the ethnically mixed character of their peoples made the Middle Colonies in general and New York City in particular an important model of what the nation would become. For a full modern formulation of the argument see Milton Klein's 'New York in the American Colonies: A New Look,' in Jacob Judd and Irwin H. Polishook, eds., *Aspects of Early New York Society and Politics* (Tarrytown, N.Y., 1974), pp. 8–28. Bender, in *Community and Social Change in America*, points out that however heterogeneous the population of the Middle Colonies was from the provincial perspective, local communities—which were of primary importance in colonial life—were homogeneous with the one noteworthy exception of New York City (see pp. 68–70 and n. 66, p. 70). Even on Manhattan, as I argue below, the peoples brought together were far more alike than they would be in later days.

⁸ Peter Kalm, *Peter Kalm's Travels in North America: The English Version of 1770* (1937; repr. New York, 1966), 1:142; and Robert M. Kingdon, 'Why Did the Huguenot Refugees in the American Colonies Become Episcopalian?' *The Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 49(1980):317–35, esp. p. 317, where he comments on the 'unusually rapid' assimilation of Huguenots, who 'seem to have lost the use of their language and other cultural traits, . . . to have dropped the custom of intermarrying among themselves,' and 'even . . . stopped using distinctively French names, more rapidly than members of other non-English groups of immigrants,' and also pp. 325–26 on the gradual defection of Manhattan's Huguenots to the Church of England's Trinity Church.

Eastern Europe, and other decidedly alien people were added in great numbers to the older 'native stock.'

In the course of the eighteenth century, Boston and New York also gave evidence of a new anonymity among their people that reflected the growth of their populations. That development was slow in coming. Certainly there remained much of the small town about Philadelphia, the largest of American cities in 1771 when Esther DeBerdt Reed reported to her father in London that 'the people must either talk of their neighbors, of whom they know every particular of what they both do and say, or else of marketing. . . . We hardly dare tell one another our thoughts,' she added, 'lest it should spread all over town; so, if anybody asks you how we like Philadelphia, you must say very well.'⁹ The newspapers published in colonial cities in their very dearth of local news also testify to the way eighteenth-century urban people knew their news without reading about it. There were, however, signs of change. Thomas Bender cites the appearance of craftsmen's ads in New York newspapers of the 1750s as evidence that artisans were finding it necessary to announce their existence to townsmen who might in an earlier day have known of it without such formal notice. The publication of city directories at New York in 1786 and Boston in 1789 attests again to an increasing unfamiliarity of city people with each other.¹⁰ Soon thereafter authorities addressed themselves to the problem of locating people within the increasingly anonymous urban masses. In 1793 New York's Common Council ordered that buildings along the streets be numbered according to a prescribed method. From that regulation it was but a short step to the 1811 report of a New York commission that surveyed the island and planned the expanse of practical if monotonously regular numbered streets that

⁹ Reed to Dennys Deberdt, Philadelphia, January 17, 1771, in [William B. Reed,] *The Life of Esther DeBerdt, Afterwards Estber Reed, of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1853), p. 166.

¹⁰ Bender, *Community and Social Change*, p. 74.

would in time stretch from the old and irregular colonial city on the lower tip of Manhattan up toward the Harlem River, and which has been logically taken as the beginning of New York's emergence as a 'modern' city.¹¹

In all these ways—in the functions that marked them as cities, in their relative cosmopolitanism and common Protestant culture, in the gradual development by the late eighteenth century of a social anonymity that has since become so much a part of urban life—Boston and New York were almost interchangeable. And yet they had acquired, like children, distinctive traits that they would carry with them into later life. The appearance of differences early in the cities' histories is striking, their persistence over time the more so. Both need to be explained. Their reasons lie, I suggest, in the ideals or purposes of the cities' founders, and in the peculiar, unpredictable way those early traditions were reinforced by eighteenth-century circumstances.

Boston's Puritan fathers came to America with a mission defined against the avarice and corruption of contemporary England. They sought to establish close-knit communities where love of God and concern for neighbor took precedence over selfish gain. Their ideology proved well suited to the business of colonizing. Because the Puritans sought to found permanent homes in America, whole families migrated, not the men alone. The population of New England therefore grew naturally at a far faster rate than elsewhere in seventeenth-century North America.¹² The Puritans' commitment to their 'callings' and their emphasis on industry also contributed to the cause of success in this world as much as in the next, and Boston became the premier city of British North America.

Its early achievement proved impossible to sustain, how-

¹¹ Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, 1:387, 407-8.

¹² The importance of sex ratios to relative population growth was discussed first by Wesley Frank Craven in *White, Red, and Black: The Seventeenth-Century Virginian* (New York, 1971), esp. pp. 26-27.

ever, and as the eighteenth century proceeded Boston gradually yielded its leadership to Philadelphia and New York. It is commonplace to say that geography determined Boston's destiny: the proximity of the Appalachian mountains to the Atlantic coast in New England, the rocky quality of soil along the coastal belt, the course of its rivers, which too often ran on a north-south axis and so provided no ready path to the interior, all these limited the extent and the richness of that hinterland upon which Boston's importance depended. But its fate, we now know, is not so simply explained. An 'almost biblical series of misfortunes' afflicted Boston in the mid-eighteenth century, most of which were related to the series of colonial wars that brought disaster to Boston even as they blessed with prosperity the artisans and merchants of New York and Philadelphia. The city contributed heavily to imperial armies, and therefore to the casualty lists, which cut deeply into its male population and so into its tax base. Meanwhile taxes rose to finance the expeditions to Canada and to support the widows and orphans left behind, making Boston (then as now) a particularly expensive place to live, even in comparison to neighboring towns. Its shipbuilding industry dispersed to Marblehead, Salem, and Newport, and fear of impressment disrupted its trade. The results could be read in Boston's population figures, which reached 17,000 in 1740, then dropped, and failed to recover completely until after independence; in the striking excess of white adult females to males among Bostonians of 1764 (3,612 to 2,941); in the dense occupancy of Boston's houses, which included about half again as many people as those of New York and Philadelphia at mid-century, a difference Gary Nash attributes to the practice of taking in boarders by hard-pressed Boston widows; in the emergence of poverty as a serious social problem well before it reached such importance in other colonial ports.¹³

¹³ Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the*

It is too much to say that Boston never recovered, but its record in the late colonial period was overall one of decline. And hard times served the cause of tradition, for the Spartan ideals of the founders could ennoble necessity by calling it virtue. New England's ministers continued to cite the first generation of settlers as a model of achievement, as they had done from the late seventeenth century, and to chastise the children for failing to take up their fathers' 'Errand into the Wilderness,' explaining the calamities that fell upon them as punishments for the sinful shortcomings of those who had inherited that New World Israel. The ideals of the fathers provided, in short, a way of understanding and of organizing experience, of ordering history, and so continued to influence the life of the region and of its major city.

New York was founded instead as an outpost of the Dutch West India Company in its search for profit. No greater mission brought the Dutch from Holland: indeed, the Dutch were on the whole unwilling to migrate, finding their homeland hospitable as the English Puritans did not. The Dutch West India Company therefore turned elsewhere for settlers—to the oppressed Protestants of France, to Africa—in the hope that they might help make New Netherland economically viable. The commitment to material gain that marked Company rule continued after the British conquest. The financial needs of the later Stuart kings, the hopes of greater fortunes that motivated the governors appointed by them and their successors, the ambitions of colonists who flattered royal officials in a quest for land grants, contracts, or lucrative appointments, all these only enhanced New York's materialistic bent. The city became a nest of those after profit however won—of pirates and privateers, of slave traders and smugglers—a community

Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 184 (quotation), 117–18, 172–75, 182–84, 245 (1764 population), 194–95 (housing), and passim.

whose spokesmen on into the Revolutionary era emphasized interest while those of Boston cultivated virtue.¹⁴

New Yorkers did well—and then did better. The city sat at the mouth of the great Hudson River, which, with the Mohawk, provided ready access to a rich and extensive market even before the canal era added the trans-Appalachian West to Manhattan's 'back yard.' It benefitted also from wartime contracts and privateering returns, and except for occasional years of recession continued the ascent that would in time make it the foremost American city. The results there could be seen in a sense of widespread opportunity such as possessed the immigrant James Murray in 1737, when he advised a clergyman in his native Northern Ireland to 'tell aw the poor Folk of your place, tha God has open'd a Door for their Deliverance.' In New York there was 'no Scant of Breed'; and it was, 'in short, . . . a bonny Country' where a man could readily make a good life for himself. In his *History of the Province of New-York*, first published in 1757, a more established New Yorker, William Smith, Junior, made much the same point. 'Every man of industry and integrity has it in his power to live well,' he wrote, and many who arrived 'distressed by their poverty . . . now enjoy easy and plentiful fortunes.'¹⁵

Smith also claimed that there was 'not so great an inequality' of riches among New Yorkers 'as is common in Boston and

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 304–5, and Pauline Maier, *The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams* (New York, 1980), esp. pp. 97–100. Note also the very negative portrait of eighteenth-century New York in James Grant Wilson, *The Memorial History of the City of New York*, 2 (New York, 1892): 212–13, with its emphasis upon the 'sycophants, who flattered and preyed upon the officials; the faithful followers of the powerful, who justified all their acts; the lovers of rank and the rivals for precedence; . . . the corrupt lawyers and judges,' all apparent in the late-seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century administrations of Governors Fletcher and Cornbury, and also the conclusion that this was in New York 'an age of coarse manners, gross vices, and few traces of a dawning refinement.'

¹⁵ Murray to the Rev. Baptist Boyd in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, from New York City, November 7, 1737, in Wilson, *Memorial History of . . . New York*, 2:202–4. Murray's letter is particularly striking since it came at the end of an eight-year depression in New York's economy. See Nash, *Urban Crucible*, pp. 123–25. William Smith, Junior, *The History of the Province of New-York*, ed. Michael Kammen (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 1:226.

some other places,' but there he was almost certainly incorrect. The rich of Manhattan combined mercantile wealth with great landed estates in the Hudson Valley in a way unknown among Bostonians. The city's people shared a sense of social distance that also distinguished it from its urban neighbor to the northeast. Some of the most memorable expressions of class consciousness that the Revolutionary era produced came from New York—as in Gouverneur Morris's arrogant description of local mechanics and seamen as 'poor reptiles . . . struggling to cast off their winter slough' who 'bask in the sunshine, and ere noon . . . will bite.' As for Morris's 'riotous mob,' it was characterized by deferential habits such as shocked John Hancock when he visited New York on his way to the Continental Congress. On his arrival there Hancock learned that the city's people intended to remove the horses from his carriage and pull it through the streets themselves, a ritual common enough in the Old World. But Hancock, no modest man but a Bostonian nonetheless, 'would not have had [that] taken place upon any Consideration, not being fond of such Parade.' His efforts to dissuade the crowd were unsuccessful, and he was saved from that 'disagreeable occurrence' only by the intercession of some local gentlemen whose wishes the people of New York were more accustomed to honoring.¹⁶

Politics moderated the distance between rich and poor in Boston. There the governing town meeting brought together persons of different station and blessed men with power for their eloquence, reason, and character as well as their wealth. Boston had a board of selectmen and a series of other municipal officers who were chosen by the town meeting, and those who sought such preferment learned, if they did not instinctively know, that respect was a prerequisite of political support. New York was governed differently. By the terms of the Mont-

¹⁶ Smith, *History of the Province of New-York*, 1:226; Morris to John Penn, May 20, 1774, in Merrill Jensen, ed., *English Historical Documents*, 9 (New York, 1964): 860-63; Hancock to Dorothy Quincy, New York, May 7, 1775, in Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, 4:983.

gomery Charter of 1731, the governor and provincial council named the city's mayor, recorder, clerk, and treasurer. Municipal ordinances were passed by a Common Council that consisted of the mayor and recorder along with the city's aldermen, who were elected by voice vote within the several wards into which New York had been divided. Qualified voters also chose a set of assistants, several minor officials, and the vestrymen who cared for the poor. But they had no continuing, direct voice in governing the city as in Boston, where 'the meanest citizen ratable at £20 beside the poll, may deliver his sentiments and give his suffrage in very important matters, as freely as the greatest Lord in the Land,' according to the reports of Dr. Thomas Young, a native of the Hudson Valley who migrated to Boston in the mid-1760s. Political opportunities compensated in some measure for Boston's unpromising economy: 'elevated stations,' Young claimed, were there open 'to every one whose capacity integrity and diligence in the affairs of his country attracts the public attention.' Those avenues of advancement, he wrote correspondents in Manhattan, 'I lament are shut to you. . . .'¹⁷

The existence of a wealthy upper class with a taste for European ways had, however, some cultural advantages, for its patronage set eighteenth-century New York on its way toward becoming an American center for the performing arts. Manhattan claimed two playhouses in 1732; by the time of the Revolution it had as many as seven. Not that all New Yorkers were free from scruples born of their Protestant heritage. William Hallam's London Company of Comedians, which came to the city in 1753, was denied official permission to perform until after it issued assurances that its members were 'not cast in the same Mould' as their 'Theatrical Predecessors,' that 'in private Life' and 'publick Occupation' they were of a different moral order. In retrospect, however, it seems more

¹⁷ Young to Hugh Hughes, Boston, March 22, June 24, and May 17, 1770, mss.41550, 41553, and 41552, the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

important that the company went to New York because people in Virginia predicted a 'genteel and favourable Reception' in Manhattan, where 'the Inhabitants were generous and polite, naturally fond of Diversions rational, particularly those of the Theatre,' and that Hallam's company finally enjoyed a successful and profitable run in the city. New York also saw occasional musical performances, as in January 1737 when the *New-York Gazette* advertised a 'consort . . . for the benefit of Mr. Pachebell, the harpsicord parts performed by himself.' And two years later an advertisement announced 'A New Pantomine Entertainment. . . . To which will be added an Optick,' which was a primitive predecessor of motion pictures. Cock-fighting was also popular, as was horse-racing, with wagers part of the event—all of which remained far from Boston, a city less open to such forms of commercial entertainment. Indeed, theatre was introduced at Boston only during the 1790s, having been earlier outlawed by an act of 1750.¹⁸

Boston was distinguished instead by its traditional respect for learning and for the printed word. Before the Puritan fathers were more than a decade in America they founded Harvard College and established a printing press in Cambridge.¹⁹ New York City was settled in 1626—four years before Boston—but had no press for almost seventy years, until William Bradford was lured to Manhattan in 1693. Even a casual survey

¹⁸ Mary C. Henderson, *The City and the Theatre, New York Playhouses from Bowling Green to Times Square* (Clifton, N.J., 1973), esp. pp. 8–9, 14; Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, 4: 639–40, 641, 544 (and also 546), 558–59, 545, and passim. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harrison Gray Otis, 1765–1848: The Urbane Federalist* (Boston, 1969), pp. 59–61. Henderson makes clear that theatre performances in eighteenth-century New York were often amateur affairs, and that companies of actors also visited other cities, such as Charleston and Philadelphia. Still, the theatre took hold there for a series of circumstances: 'The increasing heterogeneity of its population, the rising prosperity of its trade, the emergence of a merchant class with all of the pretensions of a bourgeois aristocracy, and an underlying toleration by virtue of its cosmopolitanism were the special conditions which set New York apart from its developing sister cities along the eastern seaboard.' As a result, 'once the theatre became an accepted and established urban institution in New York, neither political strictures nor periodic religious attacks could dislodge it from its place in the life of the community.' *The City and the Theatre*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Drake, *History and Antiquities of . . . Boston*, pp. 241–42.

of the Evans bibliography of early American imprints testifies to the immense and continuing superiority of eighteenth-century Boston as a place of publication. Few books and pamphlets came out of New York, and those were heavily weighted toward the official publications of the provincial government. As for newspapers, the first to be published on a continuous schedule in British North America was the *Boston News-Letter*, begun in 1704. And Boston had two other papers, the *Boston Gazette* (1719) and the *New-England Courant* (1721) before the *New-York Gazette* began publication in 1725.²⁰

New Yorkers' sense of a good education apparently differed from that of Bostonians: the City of New York was 'so conveniently Situated for Trade and the Genius of the people so inclined to merchandise,' wrote the Rev. John Sharpe in 1713 after some twelve years on Manhattan, 'that they generally seek no other Education for their children than writing and Arithmetick. So that letters must be in a manner forced upon them not only without their seeking, but against their consent'—a proposal unlikely to meet with success. New Yorkers were in fact bizarrely innocent in the world of learning—or so James Murray suggested when he told of a fellow Scots-Irish immigrant who 'now gets ane Hundred Punds for ane year for teechin a Letin Skulle, and God kens, little he is skilled in Learning, and yet they think him a high learned Man. Ye kin I had but sma Learning when I left ye,' he added—and his primitive phonetic spelling suggests he had accumulated little thereafter. Yet Murray reported that he kept a 'Skulle for wee Weans.' Two decades later William Smith, Junior, concluded that New York's schools were of 'the lowest order' and that their 'instructors want instruction.' 'Through a long shameful neglect of all the arts and sciences,' he added, 'our common speech is extremely corrupt, and the evidences of a bad taste,

²⁰ Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, 1:184; Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History, 1690-1960* (New York, 1962), pp. 11, 15, 30.

both as to thought and language, are visible in all our proceedings, publick and private.'²¹

New York was, quite simply, a different kind of place than Boston, shaped by different values that were sustained by economic success. The 'Art of getting money' preoccupied its people and served, according to Cadwallader Colden, as 'the only principle of life propagated among the young People.' New Yorkers of both town and country were 'sober, industrious and hospitable,' Smith noted, 'though intent upon gain.' The city's contemporary reputation reflected those traits. 'Our Neighbours have told us in an insulting Tone, that the Art of getting money is the highest Improvement we can pretend to,' wrote a pamphleteer arguing in 1749 for 'Erecting a College in the Province of New-York.' They say 'that the wisest Man among us without a Fortune, is neglected and despised; and the greatest Blockhead with one, caress'd and honour'd: That, for this Reason, a poor Man of the most shining Accomplishments, can never emerge out of his Obscurity; while every wealthy Dunce is loaded with Honours, and bears down all before him.' Such accusations were made, he thought, out of envy over 'the flourishing Circumstances of this City,' and could be easily refuted. 'But that Learning hath not been encourag'd as it ought, admits of no Controversy.'²²

These distinctions were reflected in John Adams's perceptions of New York, which he visited on the way to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, as did Hancock, with eyes fully open and with Boston as a constant standard of comparison. Like all travellers, Adams was impressed by New York's beauty, for it was in ways long since lost a garden city whose

²¹ Sharpe's statement on the needs of New York Province, March 11, 1713, in Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, 4:477; Murray to Rev. Boyd, New York, November 7, 1737, in Wilson, *Memorial History of . . . New York*, 2:203; Smith, *History of the Province of New-York*, 1:227.

²² Colden cited in Klein, 'New York in the American Colonies,' p. 24; Smith, *History of the Province of New-York*, 1:227; Hippocrate Mithridate [pseud.], *Some Serious Thoughts on the Design of Erecting a College in the Province of New-York* (New York, 1749), p. 1.

clean and spacious streets were lined with trees, and where the noise of frogs, especially on hot nights when rain was expected, provided a major annoyance.²³ He remarked on the striking views or 'prospects' the city offered of the Hudson and East Rivers, of Long Island and what he called the 'Sound River,' and of New Jersey. He found New York's streets 'vastly more regular and elegant than those in Boston, and the houses are more grand, as well as neat.' New Yorkers were as hospitable as Smith—and Madam Sarah Knight before him—indicated they would be, and Adams was struck, too, by the evidence of wealth, as in the costly accoutrements of John Morin Scott's breakfast table, which he inventoried lovingly ('rich plate, a very large silver coffee-pot, a very large silver tea-pot, napkins of the very finest materials'), or the 'rich furniture' at the home of Isaac Low. Still, the continuous socializing he found 'very disagreeable on some accounts.' It seems never to have crossed the New Yorkers' minds that a Bostonian might be more anxious to see the twenty-year-old King's College, or the city's churches, printers' offices, and bookshops. And 'with all the opulence and splendor of this city,' Adams reported that there was 'very little good breeding to be found. . . . I have not seen one real gentleman, one well-bred man, since I came to town.' There was, moreover, 'no conversation that is agreeable' at their 'entertainments': there was 'no modesty, no attention to one another,' for the New Yorkers of that still-pastoral island had already acquired the conversational style of the modern metropolis. 'They talk very loud, very fast, and altogether,' Adams observed. 'If they ask you a question, before you can utter three words of your answer, they will break out upon you again, and talk away.'²⁴

There are in these observations testimony not merely to

²³ See esp. *Peter Kalm's Travels in North America*, 1:131-32.

²⁴ Madam Knight's comments on the city and its sociability are in *The Journal of Madam Knight*, introduced by George Parker Winship (New York, 1935), pp. 54-56. Adams's diary for August 20-26, 1774, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams*, 2 (Boston, 1850): 345-55, esp. pp. 345-47, 349, 352, 353.

style, but to the pace, the bewildering restlessness that already possessed New Yorkers long before the nineteenth century. Even the sleighs they rode in the winter to friends' homes out of town or to 'Houses of entertainment at a place called the Bowery . . . fly with great swiftness,' Madam Knight noted on her visit there in 1704, 'and some are so furious that they'll turn out of the path for none except a Loaden Cart.' What was the hurry? And why were New Yorkers always building, tearing down, rearranging, reconstructing their city, leaving not even the bones of their ancestors in peace? They seem forever to have done things with what struck outsiders as excess: convinced that 'merchandizing' was a good employment, they went into trade in such numbers, reported the visitor John Miller in 1695, 'that whosoever looks on their shops would wonder'—like a modern stroller down Madison Avenue—'where there are so many to sell, there should be any to buy.'²⁵ The monumental energy of colonial New Yorkers prefigured that of later Americans, who within a century of winning independence built from thirteen modest colonies a nation whose western boundary had pushed from the Appalachians to the Pacific. The enterprise of New Yorkers contributed generously to that development. Indeed, the very physical circumstances of New Yorkers identified them with the nation in 1776: they were concentrated within the lowest mile of a thirteen-and-a-half-mile-long island much as their countrymen were settled along the eastern edge of a vast continent whose expanses of empty land invited and even demanded expansion. People such as these had no time to celebrate the past. They were too engrossed with inventing the future.

How different the situation of the Bostonians, housed on a modest peninsula already fully settled by the time of the Revo-

²⁵ *The Journal of Madam Knight*, pp. 55–56; John Miller, *A Description of the Province and City of New York; with Plans of the City and Several Forts as they Existed in the Year 1695*, ed. John Gilmary Shea (New York, 1862), p. 35.

lution, suffering from a generation of decline, a people convinced that the model of their future lay in the past. In fact, nineteenth-century Boston, true to its colonial origins, became the literary capital of the new nation and also a financial center whose importance yielded to New York only in the 1840s. Meanwhile New Englanders, fleeing the rural poverty of their native region, settled and populated much of the West. There remains considerable irony nonetheless in the fact that Boston served for the generation of 1776 as a model for the new republic. Its democratic politics, tradition of disinterested public service, and modest style, inculcated by Puritanism and continued through hardship, coincided neatly with the demands of classical republicanism—so much so that Samuel Adams could see in the United States a final realization of New England's historic mission.²⁶ New York played a far more ambiguous role in the politics of the Revolution than did Boston, and the city never took on a similar symbolic importance—perhaps because infinite possibilities are more difficult to comprehend than the limited values of an established and well-defined historical tradition. New York has in fact remained difficult to grasp, to summarize. 'By preference, but also in some degree by necessity,' Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, 'America has turned elsewhere for its images and traditions. Colonial America is preserved for us in terms of the Doric simplicity of New England, or the pastoral symmetry of the Virginia countryside. Even Philadelphia is manageable. But who can summon an image of eighteenth-century New York that will *hold still in the mind*?'²⁷ And yet the importance of openness, optimism, opportunity, and energy, even of materialism and of visual over literary entertainments to the nation that emerged from the American eighteenth century is undeniable.

²⁶ Maier, *The Old Revolutionaries*, pp. 4-45, 49.

²⁷ Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 2. Emphasis mine.

Neither Boston nor New York had an enduring importance for the United States like that of London for Britain or of Paris for France. The United States was too diverse, too dynamic to allow any one economic, political, and cultural center to emerge on the European model. Even the economic dominance New York achieved in the early nineteenth century gave way or was shared with Chicago and Los Angeles, which themselves took on qualities that distinguished them from each other and from their 'parent cities' on the Atlantic coast. Students of the city have been more interested in the attributes that distinguish urban from rural life and in those traits that cities share than in the differences that distinguish one city from another. But in a nation predominantly urban, whose people are geographically mobile, differences are at least as important as commonalities. They mean that American cities provide homes for persons of widely different styles and interests, who serve to reinforce the traits that originally attracted them. The differences between cities have also shaped the way they responded to major economic and political crises in American history, not least of all the Revolution itself. The characteristics that separated Boston from New York in the eighteenth century were therefore part of an important urban pattern, and contributed to the texture and complexity that came to characterize the nation they helped to found and to build.

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