



2014-098

Peter Charles Hoffer, *Prelude to Revolution: The Salem Gunpowder Raid of 1775*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. viii, 152. ISBN 978-1-4214-1006-7.

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Peter Charles Hoffer (Univ. of Georgia) devotes more words in *Prelude To Revolution* to discussing his philosophy of history than to his purported goal of presenting a straightforward case study of American Revolutionary history to an audience of undergraduates. The slim volume explores a little-known incident that occurred in February 1775 when British troops marched through Salem, Massachusetts, to seize a cache of powder and weapons being gathered by a coalition of locals intent on resisting crown authority. Instead of firing on civilians (as in the Boston Massacre) or on colonial militia forces (as at Lexington and Concord, two months later), British troops backed down in the face of a resolved group of Salemites. Hoffer contends that Col. Alexander Leslie's decision to negotiate a withdrawal from Salem both emboldened patriots and stiffened British resolve never again to back down from a conflict. Hoffer seeks to restore "Leslie's Retreat" to a much greater importance in the historical record and persuade historians "to recalculate when and where the Revolution began" (2).

Hoffer has written over twenty books, mostly on legal history and early American topics ranging from the Salem witch trials to the Stono Rebellion. In recent years, he has also published several books on the American historical profession and on historiography.<sup>1</sup> He is co-editor with his son Williamjames (*sic*) Hull Hoffer of the Johns Hopkins University Press "Witness to History" series, in which the present book appears. The series seeks to present stimulating, well written works that introduce undergraduate readers to events as diverse as the My Lai Massacre (1968) and the caning of Sen. Charles Sumner (1856).

Hoffer's thesis is that Salem should be considered the birthplace of the American Revolution. In a concise prologue, he argues that the Gunpowder Plot was "the first incidence of the gathering of a republican citizenry asserting the right to self-government of their own land and the unforced recession of British might" (3). Chapter 1, "The Most Loyal Town in the Province," sketches the history of Salem before the Revolution and the town's role in the rising imperial crisis of the 1760s. The second chapter, "Spies Like Us," fills in the immediate context of the gunpowder raid and the mounting hostility toward British rule by tracing local reactions to the spies that Gen. Thomas Gage sent through the Massachusetts countryside. Chapter 3, "Leslie's Retreat," relates the particulars of the failed raid on Salem, with extremely clear maps of the town and region. In the final two chapters, "Intended and Unintended Consequences" and "Memorial Exercises," Hoffer contends that the Salem raid influenced the subsequent battles at Lexington and Concord and examines the public memories of the incident up to the present. An epilogue outlines the consequences of the raid, and a brief but meaty bibliographical essay closes the volume.

Specialists in Revolutionary War history will, of course, be familiar with the Salem raid, but most modern histories of the Revolution omit it. Indeed, Hoffer himself admits "I was unaware of the Salem raid until I read the six pages (58-64) that David Hackett Fischer devoted to it in *Paul Revere's Ride*<sup>2</sup>" (147). Unlike Hoffer, Fischer sees the raid as just one of many alarms that preceded the Revolution's actual beginnings at Lexington and Concord. Both men do, however, emphasize that the Salem raid exposed a growing ideological rift between colonists and British officials that threatened to lead into an open contest of arms.

Most military historians will side with Fischer in this matter, since Hoffer musters little concrete evidence to show that the shots *not fired* at Salem had a direct influence on those that *were fired* at Lexington and Concord. He maintains that militia captain John Parker's decision to have his men stand up to British

1. Notably, *The Historian's Paradox: The Study of History in Our Time* (NY: NYU Pr, 2008).

2. NY: Oxford U Pr, 1994.

forces on Lexington Green on 19 April 1775 would have been an act of tactical “lunacy” without the precedent of Salem: “Parker could not have believed that his paltry contingent would deter the British column, yet he ordered his men to stand their ground as the British turned toward them.... He should have ordered his men to find cover. The only sense his conduct made was if Parker was thinking in terms of Leslie’s retreat” (96). But he offers no evidence for what Parker “may have thought” and his analysis misses the point that the actions of the men at Lexington were significant and started a war precisely because they chose to stand their ground against a superior British infantry force that actually fired upon them rather than retreating like Leslie’s men.

While the author’s ruminations on historical reasoning and memory are interesting, they do not further his larger claim that the events at Salem in February 1775 marked the true commencement of the Revolution. Hoffer never explains why, if Lexington and Concord were not the starting points, we should not look back even further to the Boston Massacre or the burning of HMS *Gaspée*.

Hoffer has written elsewhere that “mistakes in causal arguments may result from simple negligence or from ideological intent,”<sup>3</sup> but one wonders if “ideological intent” might underlie his own valorization of Salem, in part, because no blood was spilled (85). He paints the Salem resistance as a peaceful incident that “lurked in the corners of the patriots’ and loyalists’ minds ..., a might-have-been even after the sheer brutality of Bunker Hill”; he thus interprets John Trumbull’s poem “McFingal” as proposing that “the colonists could have won their independence without the loss of life” (103).

To be sure, the Salem raid teaches us some valuable lessons: the contingency of military operations; that Revolutions comprise “a thousand little episodes, each distinct, each the product of individual and group choices” (121); the non-inevitability of the Revolutionary War; and the potential meaning of everyday interactions. Hoffer’s stress on the role of contingency in history will help his readers to appreciate that the Revolution was not unavoidable. But he will not convince them that the foiled Salem gunpowder raid was the incident that “brought together a new world of popular politics and an old world of imperial British authority” (4) in a uniquely Revolutionary combination.

In terms of writing style, Hoffer skillfully recreates dialogue lifted from primary sources in his chapter on spying (and discusses the constraints that the dearth of sources imposed on his narrative technique in the other chapters). He vividly recreates the sensory perspectives of actors in the past and occasionally employs counterfactual thinking to assess what might have happened had Leslie captured the colonists’ cannons at Salem that February day in 1775. Sometimes, however, his narrative flair strikes a false note, as when he describes British fife and drums competing with Salem church bells: “The cacophony must have resembled the musical competition of overzealous high school bands at football halftime, each side trying to drown out the other” (71).

I doubt that undergraduate students will come away from this volume with a stronger understanding of the American Revolution. That said, the author does touch on several critical historiographical debates about the Revolution, including its radical or conservative nature and the relation of the military conflict to the political and ideological revolution. An instructor could certainly use the book to lead students in a discussion of what does or does not constitute causation in history. But, ultimately, because Hoffer does not really demonstrate that the largely forgotten events at Salem began the Revolution, students will be left wondering why they are reading about the Gunpowder Plot rather than Lexington, Concord, or Bunker Hill.

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3. *The Historian’s Paradox* (note 1 above) 85.