Corresponding Republics:
Letter Writing and Patriot Organizing in the Atlantic Revolutions, circa 1760-1792

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“Corresponding Republics” is a study of how letter writing practices shaped elite political organizing during the early years of the American, Dutch and French Revolutions of the late eighteenth century. The heart of the project is a study of revolutionary leaders’ correspondence and epistolary practices. Letters were the lifeblood of all early modern politics—the means to share information, develop strategies and resolve internecine disputes. This was particularly true of the eighteenth-century Atlantic patriot parties, which all faced the challenge of building cohesive movements in the fragmented political landscape of the old regime. Yet even though most studies of revolutionary politics make heavy use of private correspondence, nobody had yet examined the ways in which patriots’ reliance on private letters and networks shaped the revolutions’ broader political cultures. “Corresponding Republics” argues that the distinctive old regime private correspondence practices of patriots in each region persisted into the revolutionary period. These practices, which were crucial to the elaboration of patriots’ political subjectivity, helped produce different kinds of political networks and contributed to significant divergences among the three revolutions. Though by no means the whole explanation for the three revolutions’ different courses, epistolary practices are an essential and untold part of that story. The main sources for the project are manuscript letters in American and European archives.
The first three chapters of the dissertation examine inter-colonial organizing during the first years of the American Revolution. Chapters One and Two offer a revised view of the efforts by Sons of Liberty, as the patriot leaders called themselves, to build a cohesive inter-colonial patriot party from 1765 to 1772. They document patriots’ deep immersion in mercantile correspondence and their persistence in using it after 1765. Yet this style, which raised high barriers to posing questions or engaging in debate, made it difficult for patriot leaders to have tactical discussions and coordinate their activities across the colonies. The Sons instead created a largely symbolic agreement on general principles of resistance. Chapter Three focuses on the developing relationship after 1772 between the patriots’ private networks and public committees of correspondence. It shows how private letter writing helped the Sons organize formal inter-colonial corresponding committees in 1773, which reflected the private networks’ focus on information transmission rather than discussion. Not until the meeting of the First Continental Congress in 1774 did patriot leaders develop an inter-colonial network whose affective depth enabled tactical and ideological debate. And even then, the patriots’ epistolary tools still encouraged them to paper over serious differences about political strategy and ideology in order to maintain the unity of the colonies.

The second half of the dissertation uses studies of national organizing in the Dutch and French Revolutions to examine what was distinctive about the Sons of Liberty’s organizing efforts. The underlying problems the patriot movements confronted, I argue, were similar: like their American counterparts, Dutch and French patriots sought to build a cohesive political movement on a national scale through correspondence. In practice, however, the process differed significantly. French Jacobin leaders drew on a pre-revolutionary tradition of scholarly epistolarity, which encouraged discussion and dialogue among participants. These qualities
helped them develop epistolary communities far more tightly knit than those of their American counterparts. This proved to be both an asset and a liability. It helped them forge a high degree of ideological and tactical unity within the movement. But it also made it more difficult for them to avoid internal disagreements, contributing to the serious internal dissention in 1792 that foreshadowed the eruption of violence among patriot leaders. The Dutch patriot elites, for their part, created highly hierarchical private and public networks. The division between the two types of networks, heightened by their reliance on courtly epistolary habits, inhibited their efforts to forge alliances with the growing popular militia movement. These divisions were a factor in the Dutch patriots’ failure, in the short term, to successfully achieve their goal of seizing and holding national political power.
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to count on their friendship, support, conscientious advice and their extraordinary mastery of their respective fields. I look forward with great pleasure to working with them further.

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Though all of the above individuals share the credit for this work, the flaws of course remain the author’s own.
INTRODUCTION

When Benjamin Franklin died in April, 1790, he was hailed as a hero by revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic. Having taken an early and decisive interest in the American colonial opposition to Britain, Franklin became the first emissary of the United States to France, helping to secure financial and then military aid for the insurgent colonies. The debts incurred from this aid—along with the American republican example—helped to spark France’s own revolution.¹ So it was perhaps only to be expected that when the French revolutionary and scientist Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, delivered a eulogy for Franklin, he offered one of the first extended comparisons between the American Revolution and its nascent French cousin.²

Condorcet depicted the Revolutions as springing from a shared set of principles but argued that they had diverged as a result of the different circumstances they encountered. Both Revolutions, he wrote, were led by virtuous men who were spreading enlightenment to counter old regime “fanaticism:” they represented part of a grand story of “philosophy aveng[ing] the human race against the tyrant who had long oppressed and humbled it.” Yet even in 1790, in

¹ On Franklin, see Edmund S. Morgan, Benjamin Franklin (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002) and Claude Anne Lopez, Mon Cher Papa: Franklin and the Ladies of Paris (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

² He was not the first to do so: as early as the debate over the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, in 1789, French patriots had been discussing the relevance of the “American example” and drawing on American declarations of rights as models. See Marcel Gauchet, La Révolution des droits de l’homme ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1989) and Durand Echeverria, Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
spite of their shared principles, it was clear that the two revolutions would follow divergent paths. The crucial cause of these differences, in his view, was the nature of the two countries’ respective old regimes: while “fanaticism” was the “error of individuals” in America, in France “fanaticism” had turned into a full “system of domination.” In France, consequently, revolution “was not simply a matter of enlightening the fanatics, but of unmasking and disarming them.” Because of the “different weapons” that the American and French patriot movements used, he concluded, the revolutions had already taken different paths and—he presciently predicted—would continue to diverge in the years to come.3

Few historians today would agree with Condorcet that the first revolutionary era, from the 1760s through 1800, marked a universal movement for the liberation of the “human race.” Yet there is no question, even for the most skeptical, that the revolutions in North America, Western Europe, the British Isles and the Caribbean during that period together initiated a new political, cultural and social order that eventually swept the globe. The revolutions spread the model of kingless republicanism and popular sovereignty as a legitimate basis for government; saw the first successful movements again the institution of slavery; effected significant transformations in legal systems and principles; and created new patterns of trade, industry and labor relations that endure to this day.4

If the era’s overall significance is beyond doubt, however, the originality, impact and significance of individual revolutionary movements is subject to question. Because the


revolutions took place so close in time and (as Condorcet noted) shared many of the same
principles, it is far from self-evident what distinctive contribution each one made to the
development of the modern world. The similarities in the rhetoric and political organization of
patriot movements around the Atlantic also make it a surprisingly complex endeavor to
determine where particular revolutionary practices or ideas first arose. Indeed, it is virtually
impossible to assess the originality and significance of any revolution if one is working purely
within a national framework, as was common until just a generation ago. The promise of
comparative history is that it enables us to determine what was unique, important and original in
each revolution—and, by doing so, to see more clearly how the revolutions related to one
another and to the modern world that they helped to create.

Unfortunately, few of the efforts to compare the late eighteenth-century revolutions have
fulfilled that promise. Instead, since the late eighteenth century, most scholars who have made
comparisons have done so primarily as a way to demonstrate the exceptionalism of either the
American or French Revolution. As a rule, they do so by arguing—in opposition to Condorcet—
that the two revolutions were fundamentally different in kind. The first scholarly comparison of
the period, conservative German author Frederick Gentz’s influential 1800 essay, “The
American and French Revolutions Compared,” sought to attest the French Revolution by
comparison with the American. Though Gentz, like Condorcet, saw “principles” as the driving
force of both revolutions, he argued that the Americans’ principles were “good” and those of the
French revolutionaries were “evil.” As a result of this black-and-white difference in their
underlying principles, the French Revolution was a blot on human history while the American
Revolution was the hope of mankind. American historian George Bancroft echoed this interpretation a few decades later. The bloody results of the French Revolution, he argued, by comparison with what he perceived to be the relatively peaceful outcome of the American Revolution, were proof positive of the American Founders’ exceptional virtue and the United States’ unique destiny.

These exceptionalist views of the American Revolution found their mirror image among the first generations of academic historians working on the French Revolution. Alphonse Aulard and Albert Mathiez both regarded demonstrating the world-historical significance of the French Revolution as crucial to defending it against both conservative attack and moderate cooptation. The American Revolution served them as a useful foil to define the distinctiveness of the French case. Aulard argued that America’s purported lack of a feudal past made its revolution a mere regime change; it had not needed to (and thus had not) created a true “nation.” Only the French revolutionaries, forced to fight off the dead weight of centuries of feudalism, had created the nation and nationalism. Mathiez’s comparison, though conceptually different, was no less exceptionalist. He followed Aulard in defining the American Revolution as a “political” revolution—that is, as a regime change. For him, however, the significance of this characterization was that he could claim pride of place in world history for the French Revolution as the “social” revolution par excellence.

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The early years of the Cold War brought the first wave of full-scale comparative studies of the eighteenth-century revolutions. Three scholars were particularly influential: Louis Hartz, Hannah Arendt and R. R. Palmer. Hartz and Arendt, writing in 1955 and 1963, respectively, recast the Franco-American comparison as a prehistory of Cold War politics. Both scholars saw the two revolutions as fundamentally different in kind. The American Revolution, for them, was a political revolution and the foundational moment of Western liberal democracy; the French Revolution was a social revolution and the origin point of Marxism and ultimately the Eastern bloc. Hartz, following in Bancroft’s footsteps, saw in these differences the explanation for the relative tranquility of American political life: he famously asserted (performing a curious inversion of Aulard’s interpretation) that the lack of feudalism in America had created a uniquely consensual political culture dominated by liberal ideology. Arendt’s judgment of the two revolutions was somewhat more ambivalent, but she too saw them as starkly different in outcome and importance: “The sad truth of the matter,” she wrote, “is that the French Revolution, which ended in disaster, has made world history, while the American Revolution, so triumphantly successful, has remained an event of little more than local importance.”

Of the three, only R.R. Palmer departed thoroughly from the prevailing exceptionalist interpretations of the revolutionary era. Setting aside the paradigm of political versus social

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9 Jacques Godechot, often cited as Palmer’s French counterpart, in fact advanced a highly exceptionalist interpretation of the American and French Revolutions. In his *chef d’oeuvre*, *La Grande Nation: l’expansion révolutionnaire de la France dans le monde de 1789 à 1799* (Aubier, 1983 [1956]), 24-5, the American Revolution rates no more than a passing and unclear mention. In a later textbook, however, Godechot was far clearer about his exceptionalist bent, describing the French Revolution as “infinitely more intense” than the American: see Jacques Godechot, *Les Révolutions (1770-1799)* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986 [1963]),
revolution, Palmer argued that the revolutionary movements in the late eighteenth-century Atlantic were caused by a set of common processes. Around the North Atlantic, centralization by royal governments over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had reawakened “constituted bodies,” often aristocratic in nature, which in the late eighteenth century began to fight back against their loss of privileges. In most cases, he showed, the aristocratic revolution then produced a democratic upsurge that in several regions became opposed to monarchy and aristocracy alike. He called this triangular struggle among political forces of the old regime the “continuing and universal theme of the period.” For him, the revolutions were fundamentally similar in kind, emerging as they did out of a common revolutionary process. Those commonalities in turn justified seeing the national revolutions as parts of a single revolutionary “wave,” notwithstanding the fact that they followed divergent paths in everything from the degree of violence they experienced to the constitutional arrangements they created.  

Despite the considerable prestige that has attached to *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, few scholars followed Palmer into the thickets of comparative history. Over the past thirty years, there have been only a few isolated forays into the field, all in the form of books by senior scholars based largely on secondary sources. Patrice Higonnet’s 1988 *Sister Republics* focused on the divergence between the French and American republican traditions. His graceful argument demonstrates how American republicanism ended up emphasizing individualism while French republicans, drawing on a shared tradition, came to stress the collective. The book is marred, however, by its superficial engagement with scholarship on the American Revolution.  

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11 See Patrice Higonnet, *Sister Republics: The Origins of French and American Republicanism*
Annie Jourdan’s 2004 synthesis of the history of the revolutions of the late eighteenth century, *La Révolution, une exception française?*, effectively answers the title question in the affirmative. Implicitly following Mathiez, she argues that the American Revolution was a mere regime change and that the French Revolution, which had significant social consequences, was the true “revolution.”12 Wim Klooster’s recent comparative volume employs current scholarship on each field and offers a balanced interpretation of what the revolutions had in common. More a textbook than a monograph, however, its focus is on presenting a state of the field rather than offering a new argument about the connections or relationships among the revolutions.13

In the absence of new comparative work, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have continued to rely on decades-old comparative histories to guide their interpretations. In practice, Arendt and Hartz have provided American historians with a convenient stereotype of a “social” French Revolution while giving European historians an enduring investment in the notion that the American Revolution was purely “political.” As recently as 1992, Gordon Wood still felt compelled to defend the American Revolution’s significance against the putative charge that it did not cause any social “upheaval.”14 Just a few years earlier, François Furet confidently drew

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on Hartz to assert in an essay that the American Revolution was not as radical as the French
because “in America, liberty, equality, independence were all a consensus.”

As the comparative scholarship from a half century ago becomes increasingly
superannuated, historians of the revolutions can no longer lean on it to contextualize the
arguments they make based on work in a single national context. The political revolution-
versus-social revolution paradigm, a crucial ingredient in the interpretations of Hartz and Arendt,
has lost much of its credibility among historians of the revolutionary era. At the same time, our
empirical knowledge of the eighteenth-century revolutions has evolved tremendously over the
past fifty years, undermining even Palmer’s interpretation. (Work on the “constituted bodies,”
for instance, has shown that they were often symbiotically dependent on the monarchical central
government.) In spite of these developments, however, scholars of each revolution still turn
back to decades-old comparative studies in order to think through the relationship between their
work and that of scholars working on other revolutions. And if this is true of the most developed

15 François Furet, “De l’homme sauvage à l’homme historique : l’expérience américaine dans la
culture française au XVIIIe siècle,” in L’Atelier de l’histoire, (Paris: Flammarion, 1982), 209-10. See also François Furet, “À la naissance de l’idée d’Ancien Régime,” in La vie, la mort, la foi, le

16 François Furet, Penser la Révolution française (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) and Keith Michael
Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) were particularly important in
persuading scholars of the French Revolution that a revolution did not need to be “social” to be
revolutionary.

17 Scholars of the American Revolution have recovered whole intellectual traditions whose
existence and significance was scarcely recognized at the time that Palmer was writing: see, for
Discourse of Politics in 1787,” William and Mary Quarterly 45, no. 1 (1988). Similar
discoveries have been made in the French case, for which see the note above. New work on the
tax system of old regime France has similarly changed our understanding of revolutionary
demands: see, e.g., Michael Kwass, Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century
field of inquiry, the relationship between the American and French Revolutions, it is all the more true of the less studied revolutionary movements, such as the Dutch patriot revolt of the 1780s and the sister republics of the 1790s.\(^\text{18}\) We are more than due for a new account of the relationship among the revolutions that took place in Europe and North America from 1765 to 1800.

“Corresponding Republics” is a first step towards a new comparative account of the North Atlantic revolutions during the late eighteenth century. Rather than undertake a full-scale comparative history of multiple revolutions—a project well beyond the scope of a doctoral dissertation—it focuses on the process of early organizing in the American, Dutch and French Revolutions. The American Revolution, as the first of the Atlantic revolutions, and the French Revolution, as the one with the widest impact, are the obvious choices for inclusion in this initial stage of the project. Though both revolutions had significant limitations—from the American revolutionaries’ embrace of slavery to the violent nationalism of their French counterparts—it is still true that they were the first to proclaim the rights of man and create modern kingless republics to protect them. Between these two successful revolutions, and rich with connections to both of them, lies the Dutch patriot revolt of the 1780s. The Dutch revolt, which failed in the short term, lacked the broad impact of the other two. Yet precisely for that reason, it offers a valuable counterpoint to the two more successful cases—an opportunity to explore how epistolary organizing could fail just as readily as it could succeed.

In each case, I have chosen to concentrate on the period leading up to the creation of kingless governments. That is to say, I have chosen to examine the early phases of these revolutions rather than either the later (and often more radical) phases, or their entirety. My American case covers the period from 1765, the passage of the Stamp Act, through 1776 and the creation of a kingless government. The Dutch case concentrates on the years from 1781, when Joan Derk van der Capellen’s *Aan het volk van Nederland* galvanized the patriot party, through the Prussian invasion of 1787 that put a temporary end to the patriots’ power. In the French case, the project focuses on the years from 1789 through 1792: this period runs from the first meeting of the Estates General in Paris through the abolition of the monarchy and the creation of the first French Republic. These early years are of particular significance for understanding the development of politics in the first age of revolutions. They established the pattern of political organization in each one; defined (or at least began the process of defining) a national patriot leadership; and set the stage for the patriot takeover of the polity. For the Americans, for instance, the years from 1765 to 1776 saw the transformation of a group of quarrelsome, intensely monarchist colonies, whose most powerful political bonds were with the mother country rather than one another, into a single political unit, without a king, and with a defined and fairly stable national leadership.

A focus on these three North Atlantic revolutions complements ongoing work that seeks to integrate the revolutions in St. Domingue/Haiti and Latin America into the story of the age of revolutions. That scholarship is an important and long overdue addition to the literature on the

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period. Yet it neither substitutes for nor obviates the need for a fresh account of the relationships among the North Atlantic revolutions. Because the Haitian Revolution, in particular, emerged out of the French Revolution and interacted significantly with the early American republic, an up-to-date understanding of the relationship between the American and French Revolutions is an essential piece of the puzzle for understanding revolutionary Haiti. By beginning the process of refreshing the comparison of the three North Atlantic revolutions that preceded the Haitian uprising, “Corresponding Republics” will aid in the ongoing process of fitting the older Franco-American story together with the still-developing picture of revolution in the Caribbean and Latin America.

“Corresponding Republics” also meshes with the increasing number of studies of inter-revolutionary connections in the North Atlantic. Studies of inter-revolutionary connection have a long and distinguished history. The rise of international and global history over the past two decades has reinvigorated this area of research, giving rise to a new wave of scholarship that looks in particular at the experiences of revolutionary travelers. A comparative approach offers a necessary adjunct and corrective to both this new trans-national (connective) work and to older research.

Revolution (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2009). For a good overview of the literature on Haiti, as well as the latest research on the Haitian Revolution’s impact in the U.S., see Ashli White, Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), Introduction.


national studies. A comparative approach makes it possible, on the one hand, to better perceive the distinctiveness of each individual revolution. Features of one or another case that may be difficult to distinguish in a trans-national frame may be clearly visible when several regions are set alongside one another. Conversely, comparison can reveal shared structures and cultural practices that cut across revolutionary movements. A comparative perspective thus makes it possible to better see the revolutionary era as a whole while also elucidating the distinctive contributions of each patriot movement.

* * *

The creation of national-scale political movements by cadres of patriot leaders was a crucial part of what made the late eighteenth-century revolutions so powerful and significant. All early modern states, including Britain’s North American colonies, suffered from more or less chronic disagreements between central administrations and the centrifugal forces of localism. Revolts against central authority were endemic throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the late eighteenth century, however, these localized revolts and expressions of discontent, with often disparate causes and demands, became integrated with and to a degree subsumed into national patriot movements. These movements, by organizing local discontents into a broad movement, managed to claim political legitimacy and seize the apparatus of the state itself in a way that earlier revolts had not.


23 In France, this process was institutionalized in the process of creating cahiers de doléances, for which see, inter alia, Gilbert Shapiro et al., Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of
Patriot elites were the agents of the national organizing that set the eighteenth century revolutions apart from earlier revolts. It has now been established beyond any doubt that ordinary people—not only white men but also women and (in colonial America) enslaved peoples and Indians—played important roles in patriot political organizing during the late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{24} But ordinary people, with few exceptions, lacked the tools to undertake sustained national-scale organizing. They exercised their political agency primarily on the local level, whether through participation in urban crowds, by adopting patriot commercial or sartorial practices, or by taking part in paramilitary exercises.\textsuperscript{25} The task of connecting these local acts into a national movement, however, fell primarily to elite men. It was they, equipped with money, cultural prestige and pre-existing long-distance networks, who were able to link local grievances to wider ones and create a nascent national political culture and consciousness.

Patriot leaders adopted a number of methods to build national networks, but the two most important were the print media (especially newspapers and pamphlets) and correspondence.

\textsuperscript{24} The works on this topics are far too numerous to name. A few particularly influential contributions include Albert Soboul, \textit{Les Sans-culottes parisiens en l’an II; mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 2 Juin 1793-9 Thermidor An II} (Paris: Librairie Claveuil, 1958); Jesse Lemisch, “Jack Tar in the Streets: New York’s Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America,” \textit{William and Mary Quarterly} 25, no. 3 (1968); and Dirk Hoerder, \textit{Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765-1780} (New York: Academic Press, 1977).

Revolutionary print culture has been studied extensively over the past several decades from a number of different vantage points: we have thorough studies of the ways in which patriots constructed revolutionary ideology through print, the uses of print media and forms of reading to build national identity and the politics of freedom of the press. Some of the more recent work in this field, following the path laid out by scholars of media studies, has attended carefully to how the formal properties of print media shaped its political significance.\(^{26}\)

Correspondence, however, was arguably as important in the organization of national revolutionary movements as print media. Some of the roles that letters played are familiar. Patriot elites exchanged a profusion of letters as they worked to build consensus across the fragmented political spaces of the early modern state. Correspondence facilitated the transmission of news and information and provided the opportunity for the creation of celebrated long-term partnerships among patriot leaders. Letters were also instrumental in the creation of trans-national patriot movements by connecting national patriot leaders with like-minded individuals around the Atlantic. It is no coincidence that for every patriot leader for whom the historical record is fairly complete, correspondence forms the largest part of the collected works.

Nor was the crucial role of correspondence limited to patriots: counter-revolutionary forces used letters as well to organize resistance to the patriot movements.

Though patriots’ correspondence is one of the most important sources for our understanding of political organizing in the age of revolutions, political historians have rarely taken its literary form into account as they interpret it.\textsuperscript{27} Indeed, historians of politics usually treat patriots’ private correspondence as a transparent vehicle, permitting the scholar nearly unmediated access to the actor’s political consciousness. The scholarship on letter writing, however, makes this approach untenable. Work on letter-writing by literary critics since the 1970s has shown that the “epistolary self” was not natural but in fact highly constructed.\textsuperscript{28} Over the past decade, new work on epistolarity by historians has revealed the variety of epistolary forms available to early modern letter writers, from commercial to familiar, from hortatory to monitory and didactic. Once we recognize this formal diversity, it is all but impossible to sustain the notion that private letters were pure expressions of thought and feeling: letter writers necessarily operated within and through the literary forms that were available to them. A letter


was not merely a vehicle for self-expression, but a carefully calibrated effort to connect meaning with form—that is, to convey a particular meaning through a general form.  

Letter writers in the three revolutions that this dissertation examines drew on a specifically eighteenth century Atlantic epistolary culture which was both diverse and united by significant common elements. Some of the commonalities were physical: all letters, regardless of their genre, were usually written on white or blue paper, the vast majority of which were roughly the size of a modern letter or A4 sheet. The ink they used was almost always black and applied with a feather quill. Letters were folded up, addressed on the outside or on a separate wrapper, and sealed with wax, usually black or red. Other commonalities were stylistic: letters began with specific opening formulae and ended with special valedictions; they bore the date of writing at either the beginning or end of the letter; and they were almost always occasional (at least in part). Letter writers in the eighteenth century also shared a commitment to what was called the “natural” style—so-called because it replaced the far more affected, court-inflected epistolary habit that had been common in the seventeenth century.

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The broad social reach of this Atlantic epistolary culture was also a phenomenon specific to the eighteenth century. The long eighteenth century saw a large increase in the volume of letter-writing in Europe and its overseas possessions. Until the middle of the seventeenth century, low literacy rates, a feeble postal infrastructure and the high cost of writing materials had limited regular letter-writing to the well-off and those for whom it served a vital professional function. Governments, long-distance merchants, elite families and scholars were the main groups involved in letter exchange through this period. By the later seventeenth century, advances in postal technology, the growth of literacy and new papermaking technologies had effectively expanded the sphere of letter-writing. Middling people and even servants now became regular correspondents and came to depend on epistolary exchanges in their daily lives.32

The commonality of Atlantic epistolary practice was assured by a combination of emulation and education. The spread of European letter writers around the Atlantic world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ensured that many prospective correspondents in the late eighteenth century could learn the elements of epistolary practice by copying the work of Europeans themselves.33 At the same time, a growing number of manuals circulated throughout the Atlantic world and beyond offering instruction in the arts of letter writing. By the mid-eighteenth century, these manuals had been translated into every major European language and many non-European languages as well. They helped the “Atlantic” epistolary culture penetrate

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32 On the expansion of letter writing, see especially Whyman, Pen and the People and Roger Duchêne, Comme une lettre à la poste: les progrès de l’écriture personnelle sous Louis XIV (Paris: Fayard, 2006).

33 See Pearsall, Atlantic Families, 26ff.
deep into the European, American and (to a lesser extent) African hinterlands. Through the agency of European traders and voyagers, it even reached into the Middle East and South Asia.³⁴

In spite of its shared characteristics, the Atlantic epistolary culture was finely differentiated into a myriad of genres and forms that writers could employ. The most important sub-divisions were the various genres that were available to writers, from the formal letter requesting patronage to the casual billet dispatched to invite a friend to dinner. Each genre had its own conventions and rules, which governed everything from the kind of paper that the writers were supposed to employ to the tone they were to adopt and the appropriate subject matter for the missive. These genres and the differences among them have been explored in some detail by scholars working on old regime letter writing practices.³⁵ But there has never been a systematic study of how old regime epistolary practices persisted into the revolutionary period nor of the genres that patriot leaders used in their political correspondence and the effects that it had on their political organization.

* * *

Each of the three section of “Corresponding Republics” begins by tracing the pre-revolutionary roots of patriot leaders’ epistolary practice. As I show, the radical patriot leadership in each of the three cases came from a relatively coherent socio-professional


grouping. American patriots came out of the mercantile world; Dutch patriots out of the urban and rural governing elites; and French radical patriot leaders largely from the worlds of the republic of letters. Members of these socio-professional groups employed their own forms of correspondence among themselves. By the start of the eighteenth century, mercantile correspondence was a well known form that had been thoroughly defined both by practice and in the form of letter writing manuals. The letters exchanged by Dutch elites drew on the distinct traditions of courtly and familiar letter writing, both of which had been exhaustively defined by the start of the eighteenth century in letter writing manuals. The rule for writing correspondence in the republic of letters, though not codified in the same way as these other forms, were also widely understood by participants in that world.

In each case, correspondence was much more than a tool for the exchange of information: the specific forms and styles of correspondence served to constitute these communities. Merchants identified one another as reliable risks in part by assessing how they wrote their letters. A merchant’s ability to write a letter in the proper form represented his (or more rarely her) commercial skill and trustworthiness to the recipient.36 The republic of letters, as well, was held together by correspondences. Members of the community of letters used correspondence as a way to define membership in the group and to assign status within it. For instance, scholars interested in letters and fine arts took the ability to gracefully manipulate existing epistolary forms as a mark of literary skill and thus belonging. Individuals fashioned themselves into

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specific socio-professional identities through letter writing. Epistolary practices helped create and convey individual and collective identities.\(^{37}\)

As individuals from these professions became increasingly engaged in their respective patriot movements, they carried with them the epistolary habits that they had developed under the old regime. In itself, this finding should not be surprising. Epistolary forms, like all types of cultural practice, in general change quite slowly. So in a period of rapid political change, it makes intuitive sense that events would quickly outstrip the ability of writers to adopt new epistolary forms or fully adapt their existing ones to new circumstances. This seems to have been exactly what happened during the late eighteenth century revolutions. As I show at length in each case study, patriot leaders drew on the epistolary training that they had received in their socio-professional lives in order to build their long-distance political networks. They adapted the epistolary forms that they knew best to their new (political) needs.

The finding that patriot leaders carried old regime epistolary genres with them into the revolutionary period sets the stage for two of the project’s main arguments. The first is that examining patriots’ letters as letters—that is, as documents with properties of genre—reveals hitherto ignored information about the social and political relations among revolutionaries. Two examples may suffice to illustrate the point. Though scholars of the eighteenth-century revolutions make heavy use of correspondence, they rarely examine the opening and closing formulae of the letters. Recent work on correspondence has shown just how important these formulae were:\(^{38}\) writers used them to convey important information about the kind of relationship they wanted to create with their correspondents, and recipients looked to them as

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\(^{37}\) See especially the discussions in Chapters 3 and 4 and works cited therein.

\(^{38}\) See works cited above as well as Giora Sternberg, “Epistolary Ceremonial: Corresponding Status at the Time of Louis XIV,” *Past and Present*, no. 204 (Aug., 2009).
signs of the writer’s skill and the kind of message that he wanted to send. As I show in several of the chapters, examining the salutations and valedictions of patriot letters makes it possible to refine our understanding of how patriots conceived of their organizing.

On a broader scale, understanding the genre conventions of letters makes it possible to better comprehend the expectations of those who wrote and read them and the meanings they attached to them. Patriot leaders had a number of different letter writing models available to them. Each one had its own forms and norms, known to both sender and recipient, which determined the kinds of political content that they could contain. Understanding these expectations is crucial to an accurate assessment of what letter writers were trying to do in a given letter and what their readers understood them to be doing. So for instance, the behavior of Massachusetts patriot leaders in the Thomas Hutchinson letters affair, which I analyze in Chapter Two, is only comprehensible if we first appreciate that they were writing letters across the Atlantic in their private capacity, rather than as public figures.

A second major argument of the project is that epistolary genre itself acted as an agent of change. Habits of letter writing, I show, shaped political organizing, creating possibilities for certain kinds of organizing while foreclosing others. This did not happen on account of one letter or even a short series of letters. But the consistent use of a particular form of letter, over time, shaped the patterns of exchange among patriot leaders in particular ways. Forms of writing encouraged certain kinds of interaction while discouraging others. Take, for instance, the mercantile-style correspondence that American patriots employed and the scholarly-style correspondence their French counterparts used. These two epistolary models differed fundamentally in the kinds of information they enabled patriots to transmit, the level and type of discussion in which they could engage, and the size of the networks that patriots could create.
using them. Over time, patriots’ reliance on one or the other of these models pushed their
epistolary exchanges into certain channels—helping to create very different political cultures.

By showing that epistolary practice played a role in shaping revolutionary politics, I also
hope to stake a broader theoretical claim about how to do political history. One of the major
challenges facing revolutionary studies today is how to move beyond the well-worn and
increasingly unfruitful interpretations of revolutionary politics as purely social or essentially
ideological. Neither mode of interpretation, it seems to me, offers a satisfying explanation for
the complexity of individuals’ political behavior or the relationship between ideas and action.
Part of what “Corresponding Republics” does, building in particular on scholarship in history of
science and gender studies, is to show how cultural practices, like correspondence, contributed to
the creation of revolutionary politics. This approach offers a different and I believe fruitful way
of thinking about political agency. In sum, it suggests that people use cultural practices to
constitute themselves as political subjects, but that in the process they become enmeshed in—and
in some cases limited by—the norms that those practices impose.

Finally, a major goal of “Corresponding Republics” is to show in comparative
perspective how previously unnoticed differences among the letter-writing practices in the three
revolutionary movements contributed to the revolutions’ distinctive courses and outcomes. This
is, on the one hand, the anti-exceptionalist move. Because the Atlantic letter-writing culture was
present in all three of these revolutionary regions, the type of epistolary practice that was
dominant in one patriot movement or another was highly contingent—not an overdetermined
result of particular national habits or a particular state’s social or political structure. It suggests,
in other words, that the different outcomes of the revolutions, insofar as they can be attributed to
epistolary causes, were far from foreordained. At the same time, however, emphasizing the role
of cultural differences in creating different revolutionary outcomes is an effort to bring the comparative literature in line with the literature on the individual revolutions. The classic scholarship on the age of revolutions, now more than fifty years old, unsurprisingly tended to see political and social structures as the key to understanding the revolutionary process. The bulk of scholarship on each revolution over the past generation, however, has focused instead on cultural and to a lesser extent ideological causes of revolutionary events and action. It is past time for the comparative history of the age of revolutions to partake of that overwhelming consensus and be brought into alignment with the best scholarship on each revolution individually.

Of course, I do not intend to argue that correspondence is the sole key to understanding the history of the age of revolutions. I would not claim that correspondence was the only force shaping the political exchanges among patriots, nor even that it was the most influential in every case. The goal of this project is not to replace social or ideological determinism with epistolary determinism. And indeed, precisely because epistolary form was far from the only element shaping patriot leaders’ political course, each chapter considers how factors other than letter-writing practices contributed to the observed political outcomes. Nonetheless, as the following chapters will show, private correspondence was a pervasive feature of elite patriot organizing during the late eighteenth century. And though this type of letter has been used for over two hundred years to write the history of the revolutionary era, these letters have never been systematically examined as documents with a form and structure. Nor, for that matter, have scholars seriously considered how epistolary form might have helped shape the political behavior of patriot leaders or the course of revolutionary events. “Corresponding Republics” is a first effort to rectify these important omissions and accord letter writing practices their proper place at the conceptual heart of revolutionary historiography.
One Monday in April, 1766, five gentlemen in the town of Upper Freehold, New York, gathered to write a letter to five New York City gentlemen. They chose a sheet of trimmed fine paper, watermarked with a traditional Dutch motif (known as the Garden of Holland) and GR, the initials of the King of Great Britain, and folded it in half. “Gentlemen,” they began on the front of the first side, “in pursuance of your favour to Mr John Laurence, the sons of liberty have met in Upper Freehold, and come to the resolves herein inclos’d.” They reported briefly on the meeting, regretting that more people had not been in attendance, and offered themselves as “a committee to correspond with you & any others of the sons of liberty, as occasion may require.” Having covered about a third of the available paper, they closed their brief letter, each one signed it, and they gave it to one of their number, Daniel Hendrickson, to deliver to a leading New York Son of Liberty, Gershom Mott, during his upcoming trip to New York.  

Though the Sons of Liberty of Upper Freehold played little role in the larger story of the colonies’ rebellion, their 1766 letter to their New York counterparts encapsulates several problems in the history of the early American Revolution. It raises the question, first, of how patriots redeployed earlier epistolary forms to serve new political purposes in the 1760s. The Upper Freehold missive—in its plain and direct style, its brevity, the type of paper it was written on and its mode of carriage—drew on deeply engrained habits of mercantile letter-writing.

Commercial correspondence was virtually the only form of systematic inter-colonial connection before 1765. The extent to which patriots successfully adapted this pre-existing epistolary form to the new task of politics, and the limits that form might have put on content, have never been explored before. Second, it raises questions about the nature of the Sons’ organization. Though it has usually been seen in the literature as a series of formally constituted bodies, it is the importance of individual gentlemen that stands out in the Upper Freehold letter. The letter also poses a third and even more basic question: what was the purpose of this correspondence? As the Upper Freehold gentlemen admitted, they could contribute little materially to the patriot cause. So why did the New York Sons go to the trouble of contacting them, and why did they take the time to respond?

This chapter examines these questions through an analysis in four parts, drawing on manuscript correspondence, newspapers and broadsides from Sons of Liberty groups across the colonies. The first part describes the practice of mercantile epistolarity in the eighteenth century and situates future American patriot leaders within it. The Stamp Act crisis, the first great episode of colonial opposition to British government measures, is the subject of the second and third sections. I first use epistolary practice as evidence to show that the Sons of Liberty did not think of themselves as a formal organization in the 1760s: their letter-writing habits show that they considered themselves to be an informal coalition of gentlemen. The Sons’ well-established commercial letter writing habits, the third section argues, shaped their political communications with counterparts in other colonies. The commercial model provided the Sons with a language for expressing mutual empathy without having to take the risk of coordinating their political strategy. Last, it looks at the Townsend Acts crisis, the second phase of the colonial opposition to Britain. This section shows that associations of merchants, who specifically defined
themselves as separate from the Sons, organized the first formal inter-colonial committee system as a way to manage the commercial boycott of British goods that began in 1768.

Running through all of these sections is the argument, which has been sketched out in the Introduction, that correspondence was more than just another means of communication: it was a way of constituting oneself as a subject. Writing letters was much than simply a way to pass along information. Specific literary styles, and the kinds of things that one put into letters, projected an image of the self—as a merchant, a revolutionary or what-have-you—to both the recipient of the letter and the writer him- or herself. This argument is significant in two ways. First, it enables us to use letter writing as a way to think about how patriot leaders fashioned themselves as political radicals. This lets us see the patriot leadership anew as a work in progress rather than the fully-formed monolith depicted by some scholars. Second, it gives us a new way to investigate the organization of the Sons of Liberty. The Sons’ self-presentation in their letters reveals how they conceived of themselves and how they perceived their interlocutors in other colonies.

This chapter contributes to a substantial literature on inter-colonial organizing in the years between 1765 and 1770. Its central reference point is Pauline Maier’s *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776*. Maier established the chronology of the Sons’ inter-colonial organizing efforts and

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identified key elements of their political practice. My analysis departs from hers in two ways. First, Maier argued (like most scholars before and since) that the Sons of Liberty had built a formalized inter-colonial system of opposition to Britain by the beginning of 1766. I argue, to the contrary, that the Sons remained self-consciously informal through the 1760s. Second, Maier emphasizes the importance of ideology in shaping the Sons’ oppositional behavior and strategy. Without neglecting ideology, I argue that the way ideas were actualized—that is, the social practices (in this case, correspondence) that enabled people to discuss ideology and act upon it—also played a crucial role in shaping revolutionary events.

**Colonial merchants and their epistolary worlds to 1765**

To a remarkable extent, the leaders of the North American colonial opposition to Great Britain were immersed in the world of mercantile epistolarity. This is not surprising, since the leaders of the American patriot movement had deep ties to commerce. Some of the main figures were merchants or merchant captains themselves: Thomas Cushing and John Hancock of Massachusetts; Isaac Sears, Isaac Low and Alexander McDougall of New York; Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina; and Charles Thomson, Thomas Mifflin and George Clymer of Pennsylvania are only the most famous names.³ Leading patriot-planters, including Virginians

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³ The shared experience of mercantile activity is one of the few common threads among these disparate individuals, who ran the gamut from extraordinarily wealthy individuals to people of low birth and decidedly middling wealth, such as Isaac Sears and George Clymer. On Philadelphia and New York, see Pauline Maier, *The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 58-59; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 303; Richard Alan Ryerson, “The Revolution is now begun”: *The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765-1776* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 68-71. The range in Boston was
George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Peyton Randolph and the Lee family, South Carolinian John Laurens, the Pacas and Carrolls of Maryland and John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, did more than simply produce for the market. Unlike absentee West Indian planters, most North Americans actively managed their plantations, watched the prices current and negotiated with factors to sell their produce and purchase (and sometimes resell) imported goods. Even the lawyers who formed a major part of the leadership of the patriot party in the northern and middle colonies were involved in the world of commerce. Some of them, such as John Jay of New York, Samuel Chase of Maryland and William Livingston of New Jersey, had practices in which they dealt with long-distance merchants and commercial affairs on a regular

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basis. Indeed, many of the merchants and planters mentioned above, such as Charles Carroll, had also trained as lawyers. Others, such as Robert Treat Paine, had been merchants before becoming lawyers. Even those who did not have close alliances with long-distance trade, such as John Adams, dealt extensively in their practices with commercial and business affairs.

The future leaders of the American patriot movement had mercantile epistolary habits deeply engrained in them early in life. A planter might send his son off to do a bit of business on his own, teaching him through experience and example how to keep books, write formal letters and establish a network of contacts. The Virginia planter Benjamin Harrison, a future signer of the Declaration of Independence, sent his son on a long trip to the Northern colonies in 1772 to build his business network and get firsthand experience of trade. A merchant, or a father hoping to turn his son into one, would often apprentice his son to another merchant. Samuel Adams, for example, though the son of one of Boston’s wealthier businessmen, went to work with the prominent merchant Thomas Cushing and conducted a few unsuccessful ventures on his own account before abandoning business for politics.

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8 See Benjamin Harrison, Jr., to William Palfrey, 1772 (three letters), Palfrey Family Papers, Houghton Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The commercial correspondence practice these men learned was a distinctive phenomenon that had its origins in the later seventeenth century. Writers first codified it in a new genre of letter-writing manuals aimed at the rising merchant classes of Britain and Continental Europe. How-to manuals for aspiring merchants quickly appeared in every major European language, helping to forge a common culture of commercial epistolality around the Atlantic. Of course, the lines that separated commercial correspondence from other epistolary genres were not unambiguous. Types of correspondence overlapped and interpenetrated:


family members wrote one another business letters and correspondents transacted business in letters primarily about family, confessional or social matters. Nonetheless, manual writers and merchants themselves clearly distinguished business letters from other genres. The author of The accomplished letter-writer, for instance, sharply differentiated “Letters that have no other End than the Entertainment of the Correspondent” from those in which “Intelligence is communicated, or Business transacted.” The latter, he explained, had different expectations and conventions.

Manuals set fairly rigid guidelines for the style and length of the mercantile letter. Their authors urged the businessman to keep his letters “plain, concise, and to the purpose” or (according to another manual) to observe “a due mercantile Chastity, Elegancy and Standard.”

Rebecca Earle (Aldershot, 1999), 66, who insists on the lack of any meaningful distinction between commercial and family letters. While she is certainly correct that the division was not total, I think it was sharper than she allows.

As is well known, long-distance merchants very often used kinship ties as the matrix for business relationships. For the British Atlantic, see David Hancock, Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 83-84 and 138-41, the very useful discussion in Peter Mathias, “Risk, credit and kinship in early modern enterprise,” in The Early Modern Atlantic Economy, ed. John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Pearsall, cited below. For a good example of one of these letters, see Richard Dana to Edmund Dana, 31 May 1766, Dana Family Papers, Ms. N-1088, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.


The accomplished letter-writer; or, universal correspondent. Containing familiar letters on the most common occasions in life..., (London, 1779), iv. See also The complete letter-writer: or, new and polite English secretary. Containing directions for writing letters on all occasions, in a polite, easy..., (London, 1756), 2, 4, which offered several pages of advice on letters in general (among other things, the writer asserted that the writer had “utmost Liberty” in his choice of subject in this type of letter) before turning to letters “of Trade in particular” as a special category with specific requirements.
Merchants’ letters, they admonished, should be devoid of “quaint-expressions…book-phrases [and] flourishes.” In his celebrated manual, the *Complete English Tradesman*, Defoe gave an example of the difference between these styles, which helps make clear why merchants felt bound to follow these conventions closely. Defoe offered a parable of two young provincial tradesmen who wrote to the same supplier in London. One wrote a letter filled with “harangues, compliments and flourishes” while the other wrote in a sober, plain style. The letter from the former writer elicited “a fit of laughter” from the London merchant and forced him to write to “enquire after his character, and whether he was worth dealing with.” But the London merchant thought the second correspondent wrote “like a man that understood what he was doing” and concluded that he would be “in all probability…a very good chapman.” Or, as *The Accomplish’d Merchant*, an anonymous handbook for aspiring traders, explained: “Trade can only be carry’d on by an Intercourse of Letters between the Merchants of one Country with those of another, [so] their Letters will ever be the Touchstone of their Ability.” Writing letters correctly and according to shared norms played an important role in establishing a reputation for reliability and credibility in the merchant community. Writers of manuals also advised aspiring merchants to pay careful attention to their penmanship and the paper they used, which served as signs of creditworthiness.

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17 [Defoe], *The Complete English Tradesman*, 16-17.

18 [Postlethwayt], *The Accomplish’d Merchant*, 16.

19 Penmanship reflected breeding and so acted as a marker of trust- and credit-worthiness. Handwriting was also taken to “reveal the self;” see Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 12-16, 35. This
Merchants followed the norms proposed in epistolary manuals. This is most visible in the lengths of their letters and the paper on which they wrote them. Boston merchant and patriot leader William Palfrey, for instance, hewed closely to the epistolary manuals’ advice to keep letters concise. Of the 51 letters in his letterbook covering 1762-1766, thirty-eight were a page or less in length (at most 250 words). Twelve ran to no more than a page and a half (at most 500 words) and just one exceptional letter covered four pages, running to about 1000 words. Merchants in other colonies practiced a similar conciseness in their letters. Palfrey and his merchant peers were also at pains to use good paper and write their letters carefully without many errors, blots or corrections. Both Palfrey and Samuel Adams, for instance, systematically drafted their letters on “pot” (the lowest quality of paper) and then made copies to send on finer paper. However, unlike truly genteel correspondents, merchants paid little attention to maintaining consistency over time in the paper they used: the size and quality of the sheets they used varied from letter to letter.

was true in Europe as well, for which see Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, Ch. 3.

20 Letterbook, 1762-1766, bMS Am 1704.18: Miscellaneous Manuscripts from the Papers of William Palfrey, 1741-81, Palfrey Family Papers.


22 For Samuel Adams’s practice, compare drafts of Samuel Adams [hereafter SA] to Arthur Lee, 12 Apr 1773 and 22 Apr 1773 and SA to Richard Henry Lee, 9 Apr 1773 to SA, all in Samuel Adams Papers, New York Public Library, New York, to SA to Elbridge Gerry, 14 Nov 1772 and
As the manuals suggested, merchants kept their correspondence remarkably to-the-point. A 1766 letter from Palfrey to one of his important Virginia partners, William Holt, wasted no time getting to the business at hand: “Dear Sir,” he wrote, “I have receivd your two several favours of Decr 20 1765 & 26 Feby 1766 am greatly oblig’d to you for your care of the feathers, but am sorry you did not pay the full amount of my order to Mr Coffin….” A 1762 letter to John Cocke, another Virginian, jumped into business as quickly as the missive to Holt (“Sir,” it began, “This serves to inclose an invoice & bill of lading of sundrys shipt on acco[un]t of myself & Mr Stephen Parker”) and ended with a simple, formulaic valediction: “I have nothing further to add but that I am, Yours sincerely…” Even when writing business letters to correspondents with whom he was friendly, Palfrey used a similar structure. An early 1764 letter to a friend and trading partner plunged straight into business. But Palfrey ended the letter by apologizing for not having written sooner: “really I had not time & as I had nothing particular to offer, was loth to put you to the expence of postage. My kind love to Bart & tell him if I have an opportunity

SA to Peyton Randolph, 1 Jan 1775, both in Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. For Palfrey’s practice, see the drafts in Sheets with Letters by William Palfrey, 1741-81, bMS Am 1704.5, Palfrey Family Papers: most of these drafts are on uncut pot sheets with deckling on all sides. For the use of different size sheets, see the correspondences of John Perry and Benjamin Harrison to Palfrey, bMS Am 1704.3, Ibid. On qualities of paper, see Philip Gaskell, A New Introduction to Bibliography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 73-75. For American colonists’ interest in the material culture of letter writing, see Dierks, In My Power, 93-97; Konstantin Dierks, “Letter Writing, Stationery Supplies, and Consumer Modernity in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World,” Early American Literature 41, no. 3 (2006); and Richard Bushman, The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York: Knopf, 1992), 39. For the material culture of elegant letter writing in Europe, which called for more consistency in the use of paper, see Goodman, Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters, Ch. 5.

23 Palfrey to William Holt, 27 Apr 1766, bMS Am 1704.18, Palfrey Family Papers.

24 Palfrey to John Cocke, 17 Nov 1762, Ibid.
before the vessel sails I will write to him … Compliments to Master Debois & all friends.”

This brief passage, and ones like it in other letters by Palfrey and other merchants, played an important role in the business community. By creating and strengthening affective bonds among merchants, they strengthened the trust between partners and helped them feel secure enough to extend credit and confidence.

Commercial letters also circulated in distinctive ways. More often than not, merchants or ship’s captains, rather than the post, carried them from place to place. This cost less than using the post, often helped the letters arrive more quickly, and was considered more secure in an era when postmasters were not regarded as particularly trustworthy. Of the letters in the 1762-1766 Palfrey letterbook, twenty-four show positive signs of having been transmitted via messenger while just eight were clearly sent via the post. These ratios were typical of commercial correspondence. The surviving correspondence of the prominent Philadelphia merchant partnership of James and Drinker, similarly, contains substantial numbers of letters sent via messenger: in 1770, almost all of the thirty-eight still extant letters seem to have traveled

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25 Palfrey to Stephen Parker, 1 Feb 1764, Ibid. For another example of friendly business correspondence, see Palfrey to Trebell, 17 Aug 1764, Ibid.


27 See Letterbook, 1762-1766, Palfrey Family Papers. The evidence from the other letters is inconclusive: they both lack markings and the texts give no information on their mode of transmission.
in this way rather than via the post. Once they arrived, recipients often shared letters with others, either by passing the manuscript directly to a third party or by allowing printers to excerpt any information of general interest in the newspapers.

Probably the most striking characteristic of mercantile epistolary style was its strong prohibition on confrontation and conflict. All forms of early modern politeness limited confrontational behavior among equals. According to widely-accepted codes of politeness, gentlemen were supposed to avoid asking one another difficult or excessively personal questions. They were not supposed to criticize. They were even expected to walk, stand and speak in ways that did not threaten their interlocutors. But the fact that long-distance merchants needed a sterling reputation, good credit and high credibility to do business made them exceptionally sensitive to confrontation and criticism. If at all possible, merchants avoided questioning one

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28 See Incoming Correspondence, Henry Drinker Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. In some other years, such as 1773, sending by the post dominates among the surviving letters. Of course, it was not only merchants’ letters that circulated in this fashion. Because it was cheaper than using the post, non-merchants frequently tried to use it for their letters: see Adelman, “‘A Constitutional Conveyance of Intelligence, Public and Private’: The Post Office, the Business of Printing, and the American Revolution,” 10-14. Certain kinds of politically important letters also traveled via messenger, for which see the fascinating analysis in Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007), Ch. 2, esp. 46-57.

29 For further discussion of letter sharing, see below, Chapters 6 and 7. For an interesting discussion of the crucial place that merchants played in port towns as conduits for information, see Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 110-16. For more on excerpting of letters in the newspapers, see Will Slauter, “Le paragraphe mobile : circulation et transformation des informations dans le monde atlantique du XVIIIe siècle,” 12-13 (paper under review) and Adelman, “‘A Constitutional Conveyance of Intelligence, Public and Private’: The Post Office, the Business of Printing, and the American Revolution,” 24.

another’s judgment, posing pointed questions about the management of their business by others, or even offering advice—any of which might be taken as suggesting that the interlocutor did not know his business. (They were more willing to offer advice or criticism to friends or less experienced merchants.31) Likewise, merchants deeply resented anything that suggested that their correspondents doubted their good judgment, good faith and reputation.32 Instead of posing questions or offering advice, merchants instead adopted a reportorial voice: they reported to their correspondents what they had done, assented readily to their partners’ decisions, and begged pardon profusely for even the slightest negative remark.33

William Palfrey took great pains to avoid confronting or criticizing his correspondents unless absolutely necessary. The letter he wrote to John Cocke to end their trading relationship


32 Both Mathias, “Risk, credit and kinship,” and Ditz, “Formative Ventures: Eighteenth-Century Commercial Letters and the Articulation of Experience,” 60-61, observe that in this era before the limited liability partnership, merchants were personally responsible for most of their debts. The attendant risk forced them to pay exceptionally close attention to creditworthiness and trust. For a similar story in an earlier period, see Goldberg, “Back-Biting and Self-Promotion: The Work of Merchants of the Cairo Geniza.”

33 For good examples of the expectation that the recipient would trust the sender’s business decisions, see: John Rowe to Phillip Cuyler, 5 Jan 1760 and Rowe to Lane & Booth, 8 Aug 1760, Cunningham, *Letters and Diary of John Rowe*, 338 and 64-65. For an excellent example of begging pardon for the smallest criticism, see Barnard & Harrison to Hancock, 9 Jul 1764, A. E. Brown, ed. *John Hancock, His Book* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1898), 42 and paragraphs below.
in the spring of 1763 offers a particularly good illustration of the point. Palfrey first drafted a testy paragraph that excoriated Cocke for being irresponsible in his management of his (Palfrey’s) affairs. Yet he immediately asked pardon for his harsh words: “You must excuse my using you so plainly...if I am a little warmer upon this subject than usual you must not blame me as the loss of one hundred pounds sterling (which I shall certainly lose at least) is enough to put any person a little out of temper.” Even after making these excuses, and affirming that he believed Cocke had acted in good faith, Palfrey found it too harsh. He crossed out the entire paragraph and wrote a polite few lines which implied that they would continue to trade.34 Only when a captain arrived in Boston a few days later bearing more bad news from Cocke did Palfrey finally decide he had had enough and resolve to cut off relations with Cocke. Yet even in doing this, Palfrey employed a circuitous, polite formulation: “I am very sorry you have had so much trouble with my consignments,” he wrote, “& to avoid your having any for the future I...shall be glad you will settle fully.”35 Similar instances of avoiding conflict appear throughout Palfrey’s draft letters and in the letters of his partner, John Hancock.36

34 Palfrey to John Cocke, 12 Apr 1763, bMS Am 1704.18, Palfrey Family Papers.

35 Palfrey to John Cocke, 16 Apr 1763, Ibid.

36 See, for instance, Palfrey to Benjamin Harrison, 11 Nov 1772, bMS Am 1704.5, Ibid. In this draft letter, Palfrey wrote a paragraph complaining that William Holt had received money on his behalf and, for reasons that “I know not,” “detain[ed] it.” He added that “this I mention entre nous as I don’t want to break with him.” Clearly, Palfrey believed that he could not ask why Holt had behaved as he had without questioning his judgment and calling their relationship into question. See also Hancock to George Hayley, 15 Dec 1767 in Brown, ed. John Hancock, His Book, 150-51. In this letter, Hancock suggested to Hayley that he and other London merchants ought to stop extending credit to Boston merchants. After making the suggestion, Hancock quickly apologized for even saying this much: “I just hint this,” he wrote. A little later, he again begged Hayley’s indulgence for having made a suggestion: “You will please to excuse my mentioning this much.”
Conversely, when a business partner failed to exercise circumspection, merchants quickly took offense. In the fall of 1767, John Hancock’s London factors, the firm of Harrison, Barnard & Sprag, wrote to tell him that his oil shipments were not selling well. Concerned that Hancock was no longer sending the best quality goods, they suggested that they might send over an agent to inspect the goods before they left the colonies. Hancock replied in high umbrage: “What you mean, Gentln., I am at a loss to know. When I am in want of a Guardian our laws will appoint one. Really I know not what you think. I am a Judge for myself, & if you do not think me a Judge for you, I pray you would not employ me….”37 The London firm, in effect, was questioning Hancock’s judgment and reliability; his response was to accuse them of a grievous violation of etiquette and to threaten to break off relations with them.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, mercantile epistolary practices varied. Correspondents on opposite sides of the globe or the Atlantic cannot be expected to have corresponded as frequently as correspondents in neighboring cities. Likewise, merchants in cities or regions linked by a robust postal system were much less likely to use messengers to send their letters.38 The degree of intimacy between the correspondents also affected the nature of the correspondence: as we have seen in Palfrey’s case, merchant correspondents took actual friendships into account in their letter-writing practice. These variations, however, were less significant than the commonalities among sub-types of mercantile correspondence. And as the letter-writing manuals suggest, the category of commercial correspondence, with all its internal variety, was readily distinguishable from other types of correspondence. American merchant-

37 Hancock to Harrison, Barnard & Sprag, 2 Sep 1767 in Ibid., 140.

patriots thus had a common epistolary practice in place well before they became involved in inter-colonial political organizing.

**First opposition: the nature of the inter-colonial Sons of Liberty, 1765-1766**

In 1765, the parochial colonial merchants began to become patriots with an inter-colonial vision. Following the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, which had drained the British treasury, the prime minister, George Grenville, decided to try to raise more revenue in the North American colonies. In 1764, he proposed a stamp tax, which would have required all printed documents—everything from forms for shipping to newspapers and legal documents—to be produced on special stamped paper. The Stamp Act would be the first tax levied directly on the colonies by Parliament. Coming hard on the heels of decisions by the British government to strengthen the enforcement of customs rules and commercial regulations, the Act generated an outcry along the entire seaboard. Recognizing that the new regulations affected them all, many merchants and their allies began to look beyond the traditional political boundaries of the colonies and to contemplate, for the first time in more than a decade, an inter-colonial collaboration against a shared threat.39

The colonial movement to resist the Stamp Act began soon after the news of its passage arrived in America in June, 1765. The Massachusetts House of Representatives reacted first, inviting the other colonies to send delegates to an inter-colonial congress to discuss a coordinated

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response. The Stamp Act Congress met for two weeks in New York in October, 1765; it produced a powerful declaration of colonial rights but little agreement on how to put it into practice. Instead, local groups calling themselves the Sons of Liberty formed and took the lead in organizing resistance in each colony and establishing links among them. The New York Sons formed first, in November, 1765, and patriots soon followed suit in towns across New England and upstate New York. By the beginning of 1766, Sons groups existed in virtually every major town, including those of the middle and southern colonies, and they were beginning to enter into contact with one another.40

Most scholars have argued that the Sons organized formal resistance committees within each colony in 1765 and 1766 and created formal relationships among them so as to allow them to coordinate action among the colonies. This interpretation dates back to the nineteenth century. Carlo Botta, one of the earliest historians of the Revolution, described the New York Sons as having formed an “association” or “league,” complete with “articles of confederation” that were “drawn up, and accepted by the Sons of Liberty in the two provinces of New York and Connecticut; and afterwards, passing from hand to hand, by those of the other colonies.”41 Edmund Morgan, who believed that the Sons had tight control over the elite and popular branches of the movement, argued that “as the Sons of Liberty perfected their own organization,


that of the regular governments was dissolving.”⁴² Pauline Maier, who made the most thorough study of the Sons, saw them as having a “formal organization” by December, 1765.⁴³

In fact, the Sons thought of their committees as ad-hoc groups, united by little more than personal connections among the members. With few exceptions, they treated their counterparts in other colonies as groups of individuals, rather than as formally-constituted associations. Much of the communication among colonies thus took place via forms of the private letter. These letters, which grew out of the familiar mercantile models they already used to communicate with peers in other colonies, functioned primarily as a medium for mutual moral support and exchanges of information rather than as a tool for tactical coordination. The early Sons of Liberty organization, I argue, is best understood as an informal inter-colonial association of gentlemen that specifically avoided taking on a role as a proto-government for the colonies or engaging in tactical coordination among the individual colonial resistance movements.

To show that the Sons’ organization was not “formal,” it is crucial to begin by examining what a “formal organization” did look like in the eighteenth century. To be sure, the line between formal and informal organization was somewhat indistinct. Much of what we would think of as formal, institutional activity—such as club meetings and commercial business—took

⁴² See Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, Ch. 11, esp. 197.

⁴³ Maier, From Resistance to Rebellion, 77-78, 87. Maier may have been following Carl Becker, who described the early Sons organization as “formal.” See Carl L. Becker, The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776 (Madison, Wisc.: Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin History Series, vol. 2, 1909), 43. This assessment of the Sons, as a formal organization, has been widely influential in the literature. See, e.g., Edward Countryman, The American Revolution (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 91, which cites Maier by name and describes the Sons as “knit into an intercolonial correspondence union.” The most recent studies have begun to move away from this view: Benjamin L. Carp is close to the mark when he describes the Sons as having a “tavern network.” Carp, Rebels Rising, 95; see also the astute observations in Jeremy A. Stern, “The Overflowings of Liberty: Massachusetts, the Townshend Crisis and the Reconception of Freedom, 1766-1770” (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2010), xiv-xv.
place in informal settings like taverns and relied on non-formalized bonds drawing on personal trust, parentage and clientage. In spite of the difficulties, though, it is both possible and necessary to draw the distinction: historians of seventeenth century science have devoted considerable efforts, for instance, to determining the formal-ness of the early royal scientific academies. In colonial America, the existence of two contemporary models of formal organizations, colonial governments and voluntary associations (such as the Library Company, fire companies and Masonic lodges), can help define their common characteristics.

Jessica Roney has recently outlined five features of Anglo-American voluntary associations in the eighteenth century: a “codified membership;” regular meetings; an organizational structure based on rules outlined in a founding document; record-keeping; and financial commitments (i.e., all members contributed financially to the association). The founding documents were especially important: they outlined the structure of associational governance, set meetings and conditions for membership, and made provisions for record-keeping and members’ financial contributions. Colonial governments at all levels exhibited most of these characteristics as well. The membership of the government was likewise a matter of public record. At least some branches of each colonial government (at both the local and

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colonial level) had regular meetings and a clear organizational structure established by a charter. All levels of colonial government had established record-keeping procedures.\textsuperscript{46}

Formal institutions, whether governments or voluntary associations, also had established practices for dealing with correspondence. These practices streamlined their operations and served as a guarantee of the letters’ authenticity and reliability. Most institutions had a secretary charged with their correspondence. This individual received and dispatched letters on its behalf, either on his own authority or (for more important matters) with the consent of the institution’s governing body. Crucially, the corresponding secretary was taken to represent the organization. For instance, when the fledgling Library Company wrote in 1735 to John Penn, thanking him for his support, its secretary, Joseph Breitnall, signed the letter “by Order of the Library Company.”\textsuperscript{47} Many organizations also had official stationary or seals that they used to verify and authenticate their official correspondence. Yet these practices also had a symbolic content. Having a corresponding secretary, stationary and seals made a group look like a formal organization to itself and to others.\textsuperscript{48}

The Sons of Liberty did not conform to the pattern of formally constituted associations or clubs. On the most basic level, they did not have formal charters or constituting documents. Local Sons organizations frequently produced statements of their formation or announced their


\textsuperscript{47} Library Company to John Penn, 31 May 1735, Benjamin Franklin et al., \textit{The Papers of Benjamin Franklin} (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959-), 2:33.

\textsuperscript{48} There has been almost no work on this issue specifically in the colonies or in the eighteenth century British Atlantic. For a very good illustration of the uses of authenticating seals and stationary in another British imperial context, see Ogborn, \textit{Indian Ink}, 39-46.
meetings. But almost without exception these documents stated the Sons’ principles and asked for the public’s support; they did not establish a set of governance procedures nor did they offer a clearly defined leadership or membership system. In New York, what is usually called the first “formal” public meeting of the Sons of Liberty, at the home of William Howard in January, 1766, produced a series of resolutions condemning the Stamp Act and reaffirming the group’s loyalty to the House of Hanover. But they took no steps to formalize their organization beyond agreeing “to meet at the same place” in two weeks and to “continue their Meetings once a Fortnight”—and there is no evidence that they did even that.49 The resolutions of a “general meeting of the delegates of the Sons of Liberty…in the Colony of Connecticut,” held in March, 1766, produced very similar resolutions calling for a repeal of the Stamp Act and reaffirming their loyalty to George III. But they did no more to establish a system of governance than to appoint a “committee” to “maintain a…correspondence with the loyal Sons of Liberty in [the] neighbouring colonies.”50 Since the members of this committee lived in different towns scattered over the Connecticut countryside, however, this was more symbolic than practical.

The Sons had little if any continuity in membership or leadership from meeting to meeting. Most Sons groups seem to have chosen a new leadership at each meeting. At a congress of Maryland Sons in Annapolis in March, 1766, for instance, the attendees first acted to “appoint a Moderator and a Secretary” and only then proceeded to business. Yet a subsequent meeting of the Maryland Sons chose a new moderator in place of William Paca, who had

49 New York Mercury, 13 Jan 1766, p.3. For the association, see Champagne, “Sons of Liberty and the Aristocracy,” 102-104. Champagne, however, is committed to the notion of the Sons as a “formal organization” after this point (102).

50 Connecticut Courant, 31 Mar 1766, p.3.
presided over the previous meeting.51 A committee of correspondence appointed at the first meeting of the Baltimore Sons consisted of five men (Thomas Chase, William Lux, L Charnier, Robert Alexander and Robert Adams). But just a month later, a new committee of eight was corresponding in their name, which included only three of the members of the committee from the previous month (Chase, Alexander and Lux).52 Who led the Boston Sons of Liberty has been a longstanding problem in the literature: the lists offered by scholars vary widely.53 In New York, virtually every letter dispatched in the name of the Sons of Liberty had a different group of signatories, with only a few names (particularly Gershom Mott) parties to many of them.54

The temporary, revolving leadership of the Sons did not take action on its own initiative: the leaders as a matter of course brought almost all major decision before general meetings.55 When the Connecticut Sons wrote to their New York brethren in February, 1766, with resolves

51 “The Proceedings of the Sons of Liberty, March 1, 1766” [Evans 41656], 1. See also the description of the constantly shifting cast of leaders in Estes, “Charles Town’s Sons of Liberty: A Closer Look,” Ch. 2.

52 Committee of Baltimore to New York Committee, 8 Mar 1766 and Baltimore Sons to New York Sons, 5 Apr 1766, both in Lamb Papers, NYHS.

53 For discussions of the shifting terminology in Boston, see Hoerder, Crowd Action, 138-41; Maier, From Resistance to Rebellion, 85-86 and Appendix; and “An Alphabetical List of the Sons of Liberty who dined at Liberty Tree, Dorchester, Aug. 14, 1769,” Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings 11 (1871), 140-142.

54 See New York Sons to Jonathan Sturge, 25 Mar 1766; Trenton Committee to New York Committee, 28 Feb 1766, Lamb Papers, NYHS. Mott and Isaac Sears were frequently the addressees of letters: see, e.g., Albany Sons of Liberty to Joseph Alicocke and Isaac Sears, 15 Jan 1766; Major Durkee to Isaac Sears, 10 Feb 1766; Henry Bicker to New York Sons [Mess Sears &c &c], 23 Feb 1766, all in Ibid. For their centrality to the movement in New York, see Maier, Old Revolutionaries, 63.

55 Of course it may be, as some scholars have suggested, that the practice of calling meetings to discuss correspondence was a deliberate strategy to attach a modicum of popular assent from the “body of the people” to the actions of the patriot elite. My interpretation complements this view: rather than seeing their use of public appeals as a free choice, I would argue that they represented a successful effort to make a virtue out of necessity.
against the Stamp Act, for instance, the New Yorkers replied that they had “laid [the letters] before our constituents” before sending a response.\textsuperscript{56} Likewise, the Trenton Committee, responding to New York, thanked them for a letter and reported that it had been “communicated to … a general meeting of the sons of liberty.” The meeting appointed an ad-hoc committee “in their behalf” to tell the New Yorkers that they found their proposals “extremely agreeable.”\textsuperscript{57} Similar references to laying letters before general meetings appear in much of the correspondence of Sons of Liberty during the crisis.\textsuperscript{58}

Epistolary practices offer further confirmation of the informality of the Sons of Liberty’s inter-colonial correspondence network. Formally constituted organizations typically presented their letters as a collective product, but a single individual or a group of individuals typically wrote the Sons’ letters. In many cases, the writers did not proclaim themselves representative of a larger body. The first letter dispatched by the Sons in Kent County, Maryland, to their counterparts in Anne Arundel and Baltimore Counties, for instance, was signed with twenty-two names—apparently the individuals who had taken part in the meeting.\textsuperscript{59} Most of the letters sent and received by the New York Sons in late 1765 and the first months of 1766 were directed not to the group collectively but to specific individuals. An important communication from the Connecticut Sons in February, 1766, which passed on news from Boston, was written by Major John Durkee of Norwich to Isaac Sears personally.\textsuperscript{60} A few days later, a New York committee

\textsuperscript{56} Draft letter from New York Sons to Connecticut Sons, 20 Feb 1766, Lamb Papers NYHS.

\textsuperscript{57} Trenton Committee to New York Committee, 28 Feb 1766, Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} See Committee of Baltimore to New York Committee, 8 Mar 1766; John Durkee to Sons of Liberty in New York, 19 Mar 1766; Henry Bicker to New York Sons, 23 Feb 1766; all in Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} “Proceedings of the Sons of Liberty” [Evans 41656], 1.

\textsuperscript{60} Major Durkee to Isaac Sears, 10 Feb 1766, Lamb Papers, NYHS.
wrote a letter to Connecticut, addressed to a single individual, most likely Durkee. Similar individual addresses linked the New York Sons to their counterparts in Albany and New Jersey.61 Indeed, the Philadelphia Sons stated outright in an early 1766 letter that as yet “no occasion has required the appointment of a committee to represent us.”62 Their use of the word “represent” indicates an awareness that they were not operating as a collective, corporate-style entity.

Many other Sons letters had no signatories at all, a practice very uncommon among formally constituted organizations. John Adams, for instance, received a letter in February, 1766, from the Boston Sons, which was signed simply “The Sons of Liberty.”63 The Albany Sons signed a first letter to their counterparts in New York with just “the sons of liberty residing in Albany.” The Sons of Oyster Bay, Philadelphia and Baltimore all wrote letters with similar anonymous signatures to their New York City brethren.64 Sometimes, even individual writers signed their missives anonymously: Major Durkee signed himself “Son of Liberty” in his February 10th, 1766, letter to Isaac Sears.65 Of course, the practice of anonymous letter-writing, by subsuming individual identities under a single name, gave a collective cast to the Sons of

61 Albany Sons of Liberty to Joseph Alicocke and Isaac Sears, 15 Jan 1766; Henry Bicker to New York Sons, 23 Feb 1766 (this letter is addressed to “Mess Sears &c &c); New York Sons to Jonathan Sturge, 25 Mar 1766 (collectively signed but addressed to Sturge individually; the reply was from Sturge alone) all in Ibid. See also New York Committee to Nathaniel Williams, 7 Mar 1766, Ibid.

62 Philadelphia Sons to New York Sons, 15 Feb 1766, Ibid.


64 New York Mercury, 10 Mar 1766, p.2 and Newport Mercury, 3 Feb 1766, p.3. See also Philadelphia Sons to New York Sons, 15 Feb 1766; and Baltimore Sons to New York Sons, 5 Apr 1766, both in Lamb Papers, NYHS.

65 Major Durkee to Isaac Sears, 10 Feb 1766, Ibid.
Liberty movement. Yet even though it created a partial collective identity, the practice of anonymous writing remained antithetical to the idea of correspondence in formal organizations. Anonymous correspondence was less reliable (since its author could not easily be traced) and the group for which it spoke could not be readily identified.

An early communication between the Philadelphia and New York Sons in February, 1766, affords a striking illustration of the informal character of Sons of Liberty correspondence even between the two largest cities in colonial America. On the 16th, two letters left Philadelphia for New York. One was a collective missive, addressed to their “Brethren” and subscribed “Sons of Liberty in Philadelphia.” This letter congratulated the New Yorkers on their “spirited manner” and assured them that, though divided by local politics, Philadelphians would rally “when the grand cause calls on us.” The other letter, on a sheet of paper from the same stock, was signed by William Bradford and addressed to five individual members of the New York Sons. It repeated the sentiments of the collective letter and added the sensitive intelligence that the night before, Philadelphians had burned the stamped paper destined for Maryland “in a very full coffee house…amidst loud acclamations.” Bradford enclosed the collective letter in his personal one. A slip of the pen suggests just how closely intertwined the collective and individual communications were in his mind: “Two of my brethren since recd yours and as the express hurrys me, IWe have inclosed a letter to the sons of liberty.” In his haste, Bradford did not bother to correct the telling confusion about whether he was writing for himself or for a group. This letter, as he mentioned, traveled by “express”—a special messenger sent especially to carry a letter—rather than via the post.

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66 Philadelphia Sons to New York Sons, 15 Feb 1766, Ibid.

67 William Bradford to Lamb, Sears, Robinson, Welley & Mott, 15 Feb 1766, Ibid.
In sum, the Sons of Liberty did not have the organizational structure of an eighteenth century Anglo-American formal association. They also did not correspond as a formally constituted group would have. These findings raise significant questions about the nature of the Sons’ inter-colonial correspondence network. What conventions governed these exchanges among individuals and semi-private groups of Sons? Most important, what goal lay behind these exchanges if it was not (as most previous historians of the inter-colonial Sons have thought) to build a formal inter-colonial resistance organization? Answering these questions requires a closer look at the nature of the Sons’ letters in 1765-1766.

**Seeking moral union: the Sons of Liberty as inter-colonial correspondents**

Sons of Liberty groups drew on their mercantile letter-writing habits as they sought to create inter-colonial political relationships beginning in 1765. Individually, the Sons employed actual business letters to exchange political information and ideas: they enclosed political materials in their business correspondence and slipped discussions of politics into commercial letters. Starting in 1765, the Sons also began to develop a new form of inter-colonial correspondence, purely political in nature, whose aim was to forge a sense of union among patriots across the colonies. The Sons modeled this new epistolary network on the familiar forms of commercial correspondence. They employed this model in part for practical reasons—it was one of the few systems of regular letter exchange among the colonies—but also because

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68 There were three other kinds of inter-colonial correspondence among equals in the mid-1760s: confessional, family and Masonic networks. But each had significant drawbacks as a model for inter-colonial political exchanges. Experience with confessional networks was limited to clergymen and laymen who were deeply involved in church politics. Family networks depended on strong ties that were generally unavailable to Sons of Liberty trying to start inter-colonial networks. Masonic correspondence was both limited to a relatively closed group and followed
its particular qualities helped them advance their political goals. The high barriers to confrontation and disagreement in mercantile letter-writing served to reinforce the Sons’ unity in the face of differences among the movements in the different colonies. Yet the same qualities, as the Sons soon realized, also meant that it had serious limitation as a medium for inter-colonial organizing. Starting in the spring of 1766, they began to make plans for an inter-colonial Congress that would enable them to achieve a new level of inter-colonial cooperation.

The Sons’ use of actual business letters as a vehicle for politics demonstrates most vividly the mercantile roots of their political correspondence network. In 1765-1766, enclosing political materials in commercial letters was perhaps the most common form of political exchange among the colonies. Indeed, this practice lay at the origins of inter-colonial resistance to the Stamp Act. In May, 1765, when news of the Stamp Act arrived in the colonies, the Virginia House of Burgesses met and passed a series of resolutions expressing their opposition and calling on the other colonies to do the same. These resolves first traveled out of Virginia as an enclosure in a private letter, almost certainly from a merchant in Virginia to one of his commercial correspondents in Rhode Island. Characteristically, the Virginian excused himself for sending these non-commercial resolves along with a business letter: since they were of “of an extraordinary Nature,” he noted, he hoped his correspondent would not find it “disagreeable” that he had done so.

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very particular stylistic conventions that limited its usefulness as a model for broader political exchanges.


The Sons also regularly inserted political asides into business letters. William Palfrey and William Holt of Virginia, for instance, continued to write one another pure business letters throughout 1765. Yet in late 1765, as opposition to the Stamp Act came to a head, Holt noted at the end of one of his commercial letters that “we are as violent opposers of ye Stamp Act here as you in N England & we will never submit to ye chains.”⁷¹ A few months later, Palfrey observed to Holt that “the last news we had from London give us great reason to think the Stamp Act is long eer now totally repeald.”⁷² George Washington likewise added discussions of the Stamp Act to his commercial letters. At the end of a long September, 1765, business letter to Robert Cary and Company, his factors in London, Washington inserted two paragraphs about the Stamp Act and the responses to it, predicting heavy consequences for England if it were not repealed.⁷³ John Hancock, too, mixed political subjects into his commercial letters in 1765 and 1766. Writing to the firm of Barnards and Harrison, his agents in London, in August and September, 1765, Hancock repeatedly inserted political asides. He expressed the prevailing “disatisfaction [sic]” with the Stamp Act and begged them to “help us all you can.”⁷⁴

Starting in 1765, the Sons began to develop a new form of purely political inter-colonial correspondence, created expressly to forge moral union among patriots across the colonies. This

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⁷¹ William Holt to William Palfrey, 10 Dec 1765, Palfrey Family Papers.

⁷² William Palfrey to William Holt, 17 Apr 1766, Ibid.


⁷⁴ Brown, ed. John Hancock, His Book, 81-82.
new kind of collective political letter grew out of a foundation of mercantile correspondence and adopted many of its conventions: the Sons employed the “chaste” style, the practice of getting straight down to business and the merchants’ habit of using messengers to deliver their letters.75

We have already seen examples in correspondence from the Sons of Upper Freehold, Baltimore, New York and Connecticut. The most prominent characteristics of these letters were their almost ritualistic statements of opposition to the Stamp Act and their calls for patriot unity against it. Though these statements have typically been studied for their ideological content,76 they are better understood as expressions of sentiment: the brief, vague statements of principles were suited more to creating bonds of sympathy than to offering original political analysis or enabling the groups to coordinate. The prohibition on confrontation and disagreement in mercantile epistolarity reinforced these goals by providing the Sons with a framework for communication that posed little danger of falling into disputes.

The Sons groups issued repeated calls for unity and solidarity in their correspondence with one another. Isolated in their own cities and towns, and everywhere faced with the majority’s hostility or (at best) indifference, patriots eagerly sought out like-minded people who could both affirm their opposition to the Stamp Act and assure them that they had the force to resist it. The New York Sons, writing to their counterparts in Connecticut, congratulated them on their “spirit of liberty and union.”77 The Baltimore Sons assured their correspondents in New York that “we firmly unite with you for the preservation of our constitutional rights, and

75 For good examples of chaste style and concision, see New York Sons to Connecticut Sons, 20 Feb 1766, and Committee of Baltimore to New York Committee, 8 Mar 1766, both in Lamb Papers, NYHS; for an example of using messengers, see the Upper Freehold Sons’ letter, cited above, and New York Sons to Albany Sons, 21 Jan 1766 in Newport Mercury, 3 Feb 1766, p.3.

76 See Maier, From Resistance to Rebellion, 100-05.

77 New York Sons to Connecticut Sons, 20 Feb 1766, Lamb Papers, NYHS
The New York Sons praised their counterparts in Fairfield for “firmly…uniting with the sons of liberty throughout the colonies.” The most affecting evidence of this desire for union and communion came from those who felt excluded from it. Thus in April, 1766, the Newport Sons complained to their counterparts in Boston that the New York Sons had not favored them with correspondence. They seem to have assumed that the New Yorkers had not written to them because they did not approve of their measures. When the Boston Sons forwarded the query to the New Yorkers, the New York Sons said they were “very sorry” to have “omitted” the Newport Sons from their correspondence. They assured the Bostonians that they found the “conduct” of the Newport Sons to have “been highly meritorious”—their silence implied no criticism. They added that they had already written to the Newport Sons to invite them to correspond.

The Sons of Liberty coupled their calls for unity with repeated invocations of their shared political principles. Virtually all of these statements were too brief to serve as serious, persuasive arguments and too vague to be considered a real political credo. They were also redundant: by the time the Sons were exchanging letters in late 1765, patriots across the colonies already agreed on the broad principles of the resistance movement. The New Hampshire Sons began a 1765 letter to the New York Sons, after the obligatory expressions of loyalty to the monarch, by declaring their “highest detestation” of the Stamp Act, which they attributed to the “enemies to his Majesty & the British Constitution” and declared “opposite to the fundamental

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78 Committee of Baltimore to New York Committee, 8 Mar 1766, Ibid.

79 New York Committee to Sons of Liberty in Fairfield, 17 Mar 1766, Ibid.

80 New York Sons to Boston Sons 2 Apr 1766, Ibid. Once the New York Sons wrote to them, they replied with great enthusiasm: see Silas Downer to New York Sons of Liberty, 21 Jul 1766 in Carl Bridenbaugh, *Silas Downer, Forgotten Patriot: His Life and Writings* (Providence, R.I.: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1974), 87-95.
privileges of British subjects granted and secured by Magna Charta.”81 The Sons of Oyster Bay began their letter to the Sons of New York by proclaiming that “the late Stamp Act is destructive of these our liberties [and] is by us deemed to be arbitrary & unconstitutional.”82 Similarly, the Baltimore Sons announced near the beginning of a March, 1766, missive that they were determined to “prevent the execution of that most unconstitutional act commonly called the Stamp Act.”83 Likewise, when the Providence Sons of Liberty sent a circular to the other Sons groups in March, 1766, they began with a statement about why they found the Stamp Act “tyrannic and oppressive.”84 These statements of principle offered little that was new ideologically, but very effectively expressed the sense of solidarity that the Sons needed.

Though the Sons sought unity, however, they did not want to coordinate the actions of patriot groups across the colonies. The circumstances of individual colonies were too different and the danger of creating divisions was too great to risk an effort at greater coordination. Adopting the reportorial voice of commercial correspondence helped the Sons groups find a way to achieve symbolic unity without demanding reciprocal behavior or forcing a discussion of tactical coordination. Thus in February, 1766, William Bradford wrote to the leaders of the New York Sons to congratulate them on the “proper use” they had made of “the infernal stamps.” (They had burned a pile of the stamped papers.) He reported that the Philadelphia Sons had set fire to their own batch of stamps a few days earlier, but emphasized that they had done so before

81 New Hampshire Sons of Liberty to [New York Sons], n.d. [1765], Lamb Papers, NYHS.

82 Committee of Oyster Bay to New York Committee, 22 Feb 1766, Ibid.

83 Committee of Baltimore to New York Committee, 8 Mar 1766, Ibid.

84 Circular from Providence Sons of Liberty, 19 Mar 1766, Ibid. See also the statement of principles in the letter from Silas Downer to New York Sons of Liberty, 21 Jul 1766 in Bridenbaugh, Silas Downer, 87-88.
receiving word of the New Yorkers’ action. The following month, the Baltimore Sons announced to their counterparts in the other colonies that they had “endeavoured lately to have [the public offices] opened that business might be carried on as usual”—again, without suggesting that the other Sons groups do the same.

The absence of tactical discussions in inter-colonial correspondence is striking when set alongside the intense debates that took place on the local and trans-Atlantic levels about the correct way to oppose the Stamp Act. Most of these discussions took place in face-to-face meetings, the vast majority of which left no records and are lost to history. But evidence of a few has survived. In December, 1765, John Adams described in his diary going with Samuel Adams to a meeting of Boston patriots called the “Monday night Clubb.” He found it a congenial gathering of men “very familiar and friendly to each other.” Adams recorded part of a discussion about how to continue the opposition to the Stamp Act: “The Gentlemen were warm to have the Courts opened. Gridley [a prominent lawyer] had advised to wait for a Judicial Opinion of the Judges. I was for requesting of the Governor that the general Court might assemble at the Time to which they stood prorogued.”


86 Committee of Baltimore to New York Committee, 8 Mar 1766, Lamb Papers, NYHS. For other instances of not making suggestions, see New York Committee to Nathaniel Williams, 7 Mar 1766; Trenton Committee to New York Committee, 28 Feb 1766; New York Sons to Connecticut Sons, 20 Feb 1766, all in Ibid.

exactly the same question the New York and Baltimore Sons were discussing: whether to force public offices to open using unstamped paper. But in the correspondence among these Sons groups, they carefully avoided making overt suggestions about the correct course of action.88

Trans-Atlantic exchanges about tactics also took place as a matter of course in the context of correspondence between colonial leaders and the colonial agents in London.89 These correspondences did not follow the rules of commercial epistolarity. For instance, Eliphalet Dyer of Connecticut, a politically active lawyer, wrote in late 1765 to his colony’s agent in London, William Samuel Johnson, discussing a recent petition to Parliament against the Act. He began by saying that he thought “that some expressions in the petitions might have been altered for the better,” and went on to discuss at length the reasons why they were not changed and how they ought to respond to that.90 He criticized the governor, Thomas Fitch, an opponent of the Sons, for protecting stamp collector Jared Ingersoll.91 Similarly, speaker of the Pennsylvania House Joseph Galloway and Benjamin Franklin, his political ally and the colony’s representative

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89 On these networks, see Michael G. Kammen, *A Rope of Sand: The Colonial Agents, British Politics, and the American Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), esp. 39-56. As Kammen makes clear (see Ibid., Ch. 10), however, these networks were rife by misunderstandings and cross purposes.


in London, regularly exchanged thoughts in 1765 and 1766 about how best to manage the opposition to the Stamp Act.92

The Sons’ localist approach to colonial resistance ultimately succeeded in forcing the empire into retreat: in March, 1766, reports began to filter back to America that Parliament had repealed the Stamp Act. The news arrived not a moment too soon. In February and early March, in the face of what they thought was the empire’s intransigence, the Sons had begun to think that they needed a system of coordination and tactical decision-making across the colonies to escalate the conflict. And as soon as they began talking about the need for greater coordination, the Sons agreed that they needed to hold another meeting like the Stamp Act Congress to create it. Their existing epistolary arrangements would not permit them to create that kind of proto-government. In a circular letter in March, 1766, the Providence Sons suggested that an interruption of “commercial intercourse” with Britain might be a good pressure tactic. The New York Sons admitted it was “perhaps the time” for such a measure, but wrote that “if that is the case, we conceive a personal interview (previous to it) indispensable.”93 The New Yorkers wrote in similar terms to the Boston Sons: if they were to form a “general plan to be pursued” by all the colonies, they explained, it had to be discussed at a “Congress of the sons of liberty” first.94


93 Circular from Providence Sons of Liberty, 19 Mar 1766 and New York Sons to Providence Sons, 2 Apr 1766, both in Lamb Papers, NYHS

The repeal of the Stamp Act in March, 1766, brought an abrupt end to these budding plans for an inter-colonial Sons of Liberty government. News of the repeal fell like an axe on the Sons groups. The New York Sons, who had been the first to organize themselves, declared victory and disbanded. Groups in other major centers, including Boston, Philadelphia and Charleston, soon ended their regular meetings as well.95 Without these informally organized centers of agitation and absent the stimulus of an obnoxious act of Parliament, inter-colonial political correspondence dropped off precipitously. Yet the agitation of 1765-1766 had established patterns of communication that would prove durable and important. Most of all, it had shown leading patriots the limitations of the models for inter-colonial correspondence that they had been using. In the coming years, the lessons learned during the Stamp Act crisis helped patriots find their way to a new model of inter-colonial exchange.

**The Townshend Acts and non-importation: origins of formal inter-colonial organization**

The Townshend Acts, passed by Parliament in July, 1767, reignited the American resistance movement. During the nearly three-year period of struggle against the Townshend Acts, merchants formed the first officially constituted patriot correspondence network that spanned the colonies. Across the colonies, merchants held independent meetings, not under the auspices of the Sons of Liberty, and endorsed non-importation resolutions that had originated in Boston. They formed well organized committees of inspection, which took it upon themselves to enforce the non-importation agreements locally and to coordinate with their counterparts in the other colonies. Ironically, given that merchants formed these bodies, mercantile epistolary habits exerted less influence over their correspondence than it had over that of the Sons of Liberty. As

formal groups, the merchants’ committees did not have to follow the dictates of private epistolarity. Their letters served as a vehicle for tactical discussion and displayed a striking willingness to criticize other patriot groups.

Even more than the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts struck directly at the livelihoods of American merchants. The Stamp Act had merely imposed a tax on paper than incidentally affected merchants’ business; indeed, its greatest impact was likely to be on lawyers and printers. The Townshend Acts, on the other hand, levied significant new duties on a number of British imports to the colonies, including tea, several kinds of glass, dozens of types of paper, paints and lead. Though not crippling in themselves to most merchants, these additional duties would weigh down trade and, more important, promised a future regime of new customs duties. In response, merchants began to organize local boycott committees and started to communicate with one another in an effort to resist the new acts through non-importation.

The initial movement against the Townshend Acts, from roughly October, 1767, through March, 1768, led by a revived Sons of Liberty movement, focused on non-consumption rather than non-importation. A Boston town meeting in late October, 1767, called by the Sons and moderated by lawyer James Otis, discussed passing “effectual Measures…to promote Industry, Oeconomy, and Manufactures; thereby to prevent the unnecessary Importation of European Commodities.” A meeting of the town of Newport a little over a month later yielded a series of

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96 Though the incidence of the duties was uniform in theory, they did not elicit a consistent reaction across the colonies. Several factors determined how strongly individual colonies and town responded to them. Particularly important were the nature of local trade (in terms of the volume of commerce and its dependence on the newly enumerated goods) and the behavior of the new customs enforcement officers. On both of these issues, see Dickerson Oliver Morton Dickerson, *The Navigation Acts and the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951), Ch. 9 and Middlekauff, *Glorious Cause*, 150-57.

97 Pennsylvania Gazette, 12 Nov 1767.
“Measures to encourage the Produce and Manufactures of this Colony, and to lessen the Use of Superfluities.” The non-consumption movement even swept into inland towns that did not import goods directly themselves, such as Braintree and Abingdon, Massachusetts.

The non-importation movement began in earnest in the spring of 1768, led primarily by cadres of active merchants, not by the Sons of Liberty. In each locale, merchants took the initiative in creating and passing non-importation resolutions. In Boston, a meeting of “Merchants and Traders of Boston” on February 29th, produced the first call for non-importation to begin on June 1st. They also took it upon themselves to communicate these resolves to the other port cities. Such inter-colonial communication was absolutely essential, since there was no way that non-importation could be successful unless all of the port towns agreed to it. “By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall,” as the words of the 1768 “Liberty Song” proclaimed. The merchants sent their “resolutions…to the other governm[en]ts as far as Phila[delphia].” William Palfrey reported that they had gotten “very favourable accounts” of their reception and professed that he had “not the least doubt they will be universally adopted.” But when Philadelphia’s merchants failed to assent to the non-importation, the initial agreement did not enter into force.

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98 Ibid., 7 Dec 1767.
99 See Ibid., 7 Mar 1768.
101 See Pennsylvania Gazette, 7 Jul 1768.
102 Palfrey to George Hayley, 14 Apr 1768, Palfrey Family Papers.
Boston merchants met again in August, 1768, and produced another agreement, this time calling for an immediate cessation of imports from Britain.¹⁰⁴ Throughout the following fall and winter, the non-importation resolutions gradually spread throughout the northern colonies with no apparent impetus but local pressure and newspaper reprints of resolves from other colonies. A number of Massachusetts towns, including the important ports of Salem and Marblehead, joined with Boston. New York merchants, after initially hesitating to join without the concurrence of Philadelphia, subscribed to the agreement in September.¹⁰⁵ Philadelphia merchants resisted calls for a boycott until the end of the winter, but on March 10, 1769, they finally agreed.¹⁰⁶ With their concurrence, the non-importation resolutions came into effect.

By the start of 1769, the merchant committees discussing non-importation had come to look very different from the Sons committees of 1765 and 1766. Unlike their predecessors, the merchant committees had known and established membership. All of the merchant committees formed themselves by asking traders to sign an “association” promising not to undertake importation. The lists of traders involved were sometimes publicized and sometimes not, but they were known to one another. There was thus none of the fluidity of personnel characteristic of the Sons in 1765 and 1766.¹⁰⁷ Aided by their mostly fixed membership, the groups formed standing committees. The most important in each one was the Committee of Inspection, charged

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¹⁰⁶ Andrews, Boston Merchants, 211 and Ryerson, Revolution is now begun, 29.

¹⁰⁷ For Boston, see Tyler, Smugglers and Patriots, 114-15; for New York, see Tiedemann, Reluctant Revolutionaries, 128-29 and Becker, History of Political Parties, 75; for Philadelphia, see Ryerson, Revolution is now begun, 28-29. Membership lists were sometimes available even to those outside the group itself: see Ryerson, Revolution is now begun, 29n19.
with policing the agreement. Merchants in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and other towns established these Committees.\textsuperscript{108} The members took seriously their role as a representative body. In New York, for instance, when the Committee found that local merchants would no longer obey its rulings, it published a broadside declaring that “we consider ourselves no long a Committee” and called for a new general meeting to “choose another Committee.”\textsuperscript{109}

By 1769, many of the “associations” included not only statements of principles, like the Sons’ associations in 1765-66, but also specific political goals and a mechanism to enforce them. The Philadelphia merchants’ committee produced an elaborate set of rules for their own government.\textsuperscript{110} In Charleston, the first general meeting of merchants consented to non-importation and then appointed “a Committee of thirteen Gentlemen, for the particular Purpose of concerting and doing whatever might be farther necessary to give Force to the new Association.”\textsuperscript{111} The merchants’ committees charged the Committees of Inspection with enforcing these measures—and enforce them they did. In October, 1769, the Boston Committee made “strict Enquiry after such Persons, as may hereafter purchase Goods of those who continue to import from Great Britain, contrary to the Agreement of the Merchants, and publish their Names in the News Papers.”\textsuperscript{112} Two months later, the body of the merchants directed the Committee to “discover the owner or owners of such Goods [illicitly imported] upon their

\textsuperscript{108} For Philadelphia, see Pennsylvania \textit{Gazette}, 3 Aug 1769; for New York, see Tiedemann, \textit{Reluctant Revolutionaries}, 155 and Pennsylvania \textit{Gazette}, 23 Mar 1769; for Boston, see Andrews, \textit{Boston Merchants}, 204-206.

\textsuperscript{109} “Advertisement,” 31 May 1770 [Evans 11782].

\textsuperscript{110} See Ryerson, \textit{Revolution is now begun}, 29. These rules are in the Charles Thomson Papers at the Library of Congress.

\textsuperscript{111} Essex \textit{Gazette}, 22 Aug 1769.

\textsuperscript{112} Pennsylvania \textit{Gazette}, 19 Oct 1769.
Arrival” so that they could be shunned for “the space of two Years.” In April, 1770, we find the Committee reporting on the “most unaccountable and extraordinary conduct” of several importers who had had the temerity to accept goods.\textsuperscript{113}

The merchants’ committees adopted an epistolary style that both arose from their collective, pseudo-corporate organization and helped at the same time to create it. Unlike the Sons’ letters of the previous two years, the merchants’ letters were from the beginning always collective. The Boston merchants sent their first letter as a circular, signed by a number of leading local merchants and addressed to “The Merchants and Traders” of the other port towns.\textsuperscript{114} In August, the Boston merchants addressed another letter to their Philadelphia counterparts: this one bore the signatures of seven Boston merchants, acting as representatives, and was addressed to seven Philadelphia merchants, identified as the representatives of their committee.\textsuperscript{115} The New York committee sent a similar letter to its New Haven counterpart in mid-1769. They directed it from one Committee to another and multiple individuals signed the letter as representatives for their fellow merchants.\textsuperscript{116}

The style of the merchant committees’ letters also served to present the committees as formal organizations and to emphasize their focus on coordinated action. Like other merchants’ letters, they jumped right into the business at hand. Unlike merchants’ letters, though, the

\textsuperscript{113} “The Merchants and all other, who are any ways concerned in, or connected with trade…,” 19 Apr 1770.

\textsuperscript{114} See Pennsylvania Gazette, 31 Mar 1768 and Boston Gazette, 28 Mar 1768.

\textsuperscript{115} Boston Committee of Merchants to Philadelphia Committee of Merchants, 11 Aug 1768, Pennsylvania Stamp Act and Non-Importation Resolutions Collection, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. On the Philadelphia committee and efforts to gain a non-importation agreement there, see Ryerson, Revolution is now begun, 28-29.

\textsuperscript{116} Committee of Merchants in New York to Committee of Merchants in New Haven, 27 Jul 1769, Miscellaneous Bound Documents, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
committees made little effort in their letters to develop affective bonds. This is of course not surprising, given their collective authorship. The “business” of these letters also differed from that of the Sons’ correspondence. Instead of the general statements of principles and calls for union with which the Sons began their letters, the merchants committees’ letters almost always began with a description of events or a request to the recipients to take action. “As several Vessels have lately arrived here from London, and it has been [said] that the Trade has been endeavouring to break through the Non-importation Agreement,” began a typical letter from the Boston Committee of Merchants, “we take the earliest Opportunity to acquaint you of the Proceedings of the Trade.”117 A similar directness characterized the acrid exchange in the mid-1770 between the Philadelphia and New York Committees over whether the New Yorkers had in fact violated the non-importation agreements. “A great majority,” the New Yorkers reported, favored “importing every Thing, except such Articles as are, or may hereafter be subject to Duty for the Purpose of raising a Revenue in America.”118

The collective letters had a sharp tone and their writers showed a readiness to give advice and even offer reproaches, which represented a significant departure from the extreme politeness of the Sons in 1765-1766. In a July, 1768, letter, the New York merchants’ committee tried to put to rest a rumor that New York merchants had been secretly selling English goods, and urged their brethren to punish the person who had spread the rumor, “it being absolutely necessary to

117 Committee of Merchants in Boston to Committee of Merchants in New York, 5 May 1770, Pennsylvania Gazette, 24 May 1770 [supplement]. See also Two Letters. Circular Letter, from the Late Committee… [Evans 11903] and letters cited below.

118 See Pennsylvania Gazette, 12 Jul 1770. See also the debate between the merchants of Essex County, N.J., and the New Yorkers in Pennsylvania Gazette, 12 Jul 1770.
make examples of such imposters to deter others from the like practices.”

In a subsequent letter, after the New Haven merchants had signed an association and sent it to them, the New York merchants offered some advice on the articles of association:

- the agreement subscribed by your merchants & traders relative to the non importation of goods…is unexceptionable in every particular except the clause excepting from the said agreement “such other articles as a majority of the subscribers may hereafter judge and declare in writing under their hands to be necessary.”

- we think it better to brave every necessity than by confessing our weakness to give the least room to our adversaries to flatter themselves with hopes of our rescinding in the most minute particulars.

The New York merchants had good reason to think that the New Haven merchants would be receptive to their objections, since a year earlier the Boston merchants had revised their regulations in response to the New Yorkers’ complaints. According to William Palfrey, “the merchants here in order to conform to New York & Phila have alter’d their resolutions wth respect to stoppg the importation of goods.”

The inter-colonial consultations grew, if anything, even more intense as the non-importation agreement wore on and cracks increasingly appeared in the patriot merchants’ united front. In mid-1770, the New York committee wrote to the Boston merchants about the problem

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119 Committee of Merchants in New York to Roger Sherman, 12 Jul 1769, Miscellaneous Bound Documents, MHS.

120 Committee of Merchants in New York to Committee of Merchants in New Haven, 27 Jul 1769, Miscellaneous Bound Documents, MHS.

121 Palfrey to George Hayley, 12 May 1768 [draft], Palfrey Family Papers.
of inter-colonial smuggling of illicitly imported goods. To put an end to it, they urged that trade between Connecticut and New Jersey and New York should be cut off.\textsuperscript{122} About a month later, the Boston merchants wrote to their Philadelphia counterparts to get their opinion on the current situation. The merchant community, they wrote, “being sensible of the expedien[cy] of a const[ant] intercourse & communic[atio]n of sentim[en]ts between ye colo[nies] who have ent[ere]d into a common agreem[en]t, hav[in]g determ[ine]d in a meet[in]g held the 11\textsuperscript{th} day of Sept inst[ant] to request your sentiments.”\textsuperscript{123} This request for advice stands in stark opposition to the epistolary practice of the Sons in 1765-1766—which never, as we have seen, sought one another’s advice.

The merchant committees, in short, proved much more prepared to discuss their respective conduct and even to criticize one another than the Sons had been in 1765-66. In part, this resulted from the fact that each community of merchants had a powerful interest in making sure that merchants in other communities did not cheat on the non-importation agreement: a single major port abandoning the agreement would be ruinous to all the others. Yet their different inter-colonial interactions are also connected to the different organizational structure the merchants established and the epistolary norms that reflected this new reality. As constituted bodies, the merchants’ committees could act outside the normal bounds of exchanges between individual merchants. Merchants, in other words, by organizing the first formalized committee system, began the process of building a coordinated system of inter-colonial opposition to Britain.

\textsuperscript{122} New York Inspectors to Trade of Town of Boston, 6 Aug 1770, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL.

\textsuperscript{123} Boston Committee of Merchants to Philadelphia Committee of Merchants, 15 Sept 1770, Ibid.
The importance of the merchants’ committees becomes even clearer when compared to the ongoing activities of the Sons of Liberty in the years 1767-1770. Though the groups had become quiescent after the repeal of the Stamp Act, many of the individuals who had been active remained involved in revolutionary politics and in some cases they reactivated the old Sons organizations. The division between the two groups, though it should not be overstated, was real. In September, 1770, Samuel Adams received a letter from Peter Timothy, one of the leading Sons of Liberty in Charleston, asking him why the Charleston merchants’ letters to Boston had not been answered. In his response, Adams apologized for the lack of response. He had opened the letter, which was addressed to the “Sons of Liberty in Boston...professing my self a Son of Liberty.” But he found “it was designd for the Trade, with whom I was not connected, but as an Auxiliary in their Nonimportation Agreement. I therefore deliverd it to the Chairman of the Com[mitte]e here.”\textsuperscript{124} A similar division existed in Charleston, where radicals elected two distinct committees, one of merchants and the other a “general committee” comprising mostly planters and mechanics.\textsuperscript{125}

Collectively, the Sons limited themselves to getting their respective assemblies to petition Parliament for a repeal of the Acts. As they had done before, the Sons acted through a combination of public and private channels. Their most important accomplishment was getting the Boston town meeting to petition the Massachusetts House to circularize the other colonial legislatures. The letter, dated February 11\textsuperscript{th}, 1768, laid out the ideological case for opposition to


\textsuperscript{125} These committees eventually merged into a single group that met together, but the patriots retained the distinction among them. See the description printed in the Essex \textit{Gazette}, 22 Aug 1769 and the analyses in Walsh, \textit{Charleston’s Sons of Liberty}, 49-50 and Estes, “Charles Town’s Sons of Liberty: A Closer Look,” 85-86.
the Townshend Acts and urged the other legislatures to petition Parliament for a repeal of the
acts. The circular received relatively quick responses from other colonies. The legislatures of
Virginia and Connecticut wrote back enthusiastically by August. All concurred in the
Massachusetts measures and instructed their agents in England to “join with the Agents of the
other Provinces in America, in obtaining a Repeal” of the Townshend Acts. Other colonial
assemblies, though less ready to leap into opposition, took the circular under careful
consideration, to the annoyance of their respective governors.126

As individuals, many leading Sons continued to correspond with one another just as they
had before: with a great concern for forging unity, but almost no effort to coordinate tactics.
John Dickinson emerged as a particularly prolific producer of these letters, especially after the
widespread success his “Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania” (1767-1768) enjoyed across the
colonies. He wrote a series of letters in 1767 and 1768 to James Otis, with whom he had served
in the Stamp Act Congress. In the first, he sent Otis a copy of the first letter, “to be dispos’d of
as you think proper, not intending to give out any other Copy.” He had also shown the letters “to
three Men of Learning here, who are my Friends.”127 In subsequent letters, he and Otis
exchanged compliments and information. There is no mention in any of these letters of the
commercial boycott, the major issue in inter-colonial patriot relations.128

126 For these resolves, see Pennsylvania Gazette, 27 Jun 1768 and 15 Aug 1768. For discussions
of the legislatures’ action, see William James Van Schreeven and Robert L. Scribner, eds.,
Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence, 8 vols. (Charlottesville, Va.: University
Schlesinger, Colonial Merchants, 111-113. Pennsylvania refused to act: see Ryerson, Revolution
is now begun, 21.

127 John Dickinson to James Otis, 5 Dec 1767, Warren-Adams Letters, Being chiefly a
(Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1917), 4.

128 John Dickinson to James Otis, 25 Jan 1768, 11 Apr 1768 and Jul 1768, all in Ibid., 4-7.
During the summer of 1768, Dickinson also entered into a correspondence with Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, another warm patriot who had taken a role in the opposition to the Stamp Act. As in the correspondence with Otis, Dickinson discussed ideology, rather than action, with Lee. Lee’s first letter to Dickinson congratulated him on having given “just alarm, and of demonstrating the late measures to be, at once, destructive of public liberty, and in violation of those rights which God and nature have given us.” In a subsequent letter, Lee lamented that the Pennsylvania assembly had not resolved against the Townshend Acts, and discussed the ideological positions of the American colonies, Parliament and the king, but he made no mention of the non-importation agreements.129

As had been the case during the resistance to the Stamp Act, the colonial opposition collapsed when Parliament repealed most of the Townshend Acts in 1770. Once again, the colonists declared victory and disbanded their nascent inter-colonial correspondence network. The Committees of Merchants closed up shop; Committees of Inspection ceased to exist; and in the middle and southern colonies many of the individual patriot leaders fell silent. Yet the development of the merchant committees in 1768 and 1769 shows that if patriot leaders had the right kind of group to work with—for instance, importers—they were capable of assembling an inter-colonial system of formal associations that could coordinate their tactics via letter. During the Townshend crisis, the system focused narrowly on preventing imports and proved only partially successful at accomplishing even that limited task.130 But it lay the foundation for


130 On the efficacy of non-importation, see James F. Shepherd and Gary M. Walton, Shipping, Maritime Trade, and the Economic Development of Colonial North America (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), 163-64. For a more qualitative measures, see T. H. Breen, The
successor organizations that would create a far more comprehensive, far more powerful inter-colonial network.

**Conclusion**

This chapter makes four main points about the nature of inter-colonial organizing during the first five years of American opposition to British imperial policies. First, most patriot leaders were deeply immersed in the epistolary worlds of commerce. Second, the Sons of Liberty in 1765 and 1766 were not, as has been thought, a formally-constituted inter-colonial organization. Rather, they were protean and loosely-organized groups that corresponded almost exclusively as individuals or groups of individuals. These correspondences, third, relied on mercantile epistolary models, which enabled them to build a moral union among patriots across the colonies but not a true inter-colonial patriot movement. Fourth, the merchants’ committees that organized against the Townshend Act did establish fully formal organizations that undertook inter-colonial coordination.

The findings of this chapter suggest that the patriot party, especially the Sons of Liberty, was not (as has often been claimed) a powerful and effective force from the outset. Rather, it should be seen as a rather impermanent and flexible structure based on loose organizations lacking a coherent leadership or governance structure. Run by groups of individuals, the Sons used a roughly adapted model of mercantile epistolary to built their inter-colonial correspondence networks. Looking past the well-known inability of the patriots to maintain an active movement in the absence of pressure from the British government, I argue that the very epistolary habits that patriots relied upon to build their networks limited their ability to build an

organized and formalized opposition movement. As late as 1769, the Sons themselves (as distinct from the merchants who policed the non-importation agreements) did not develop an inter-colonial system capable of coordinated action.

The purpose of the Sons of Liberty correspondence, I argue, has also been misunderstood. The Sons’ correspondence network was neither a proto-government nor an effort to build a formal and durable inter-colonial opposition movement. Rather, it operated as a kind of moral support network. Patriots up and down the seaboard shared their successes (and occasionally their failures) with one another and asserted their common purpose. This adds a new dimension to our understanding of the role that affect and sentiment played in the coming of the American Revolution. In recent years, scholars have begun to argue that sentimental discourses provided an important part of the political vocabulary of the colonial resistance movement. Much of this work has focused on print culture and popular perceptions of affective language. This chapter shows how the language of sentiment played a central role in patriot leaders’ political strategy.131

In addition to revising our understanding of the first years of the American resistance movement, this chapter also make two broader points about correspondence and politics. First, it suggests that scholars need to pay closer attention to the ways in which correspondence not only served as a conduit for information but also instantiated particular forms of patriot sociability and organization. Correspondence provided one of the important tools that patriots used to define themselves as subjects and as political actors. As such, correspondence practices offer us a

privileged window into how individuals and organizations imagined themselves. Writing styles, forms of address and modes of carriage all provide valuable clues to the quality of political organization that individuals in the early modern period were constructing. Second, the findings of this chapter suggest that epistolary habits were more durable than scholars have thought. The habits of mercantile epistolarity that future American patriot leaders learned as young men shaped both their business lives and their deepening involvement in politics. As we will see in the next chapter, patriot leaders’ immersion in the rituals and conventions of mercantile epistolarity profoundly influenced how they responded to political challenges well into the 1770s.
In December, 1770, shortly after the final collapse of the non-importation agreements, Arthur Lee, a Virginian resident in London, wrote a letter to Samuel Adams rueing the weakened state of the American patriot movement. Lee thought he discerned a hidden trans-Atlantic plot against American liberties and he feared the “union, secrecy and perseverance” of those “who meditate our ruin.” He was particularly worried that the patriots’ opponents were dominating the flow of information from the colonies to the mother country, weakening the patriots’ position on both sides of the Atlantic. News and plans established in London exerted a powerful influence on colonial politics. But the patriots’ opponents in England, Lee wrote, received the most “speedy and accurate intelligence on all political affairs” and regularly used it to outmaneuver the patriots’ allies at Parliament and in the ministerial councils. In his response, Adams concurred that there was a “plan” afoot to curtail the colonists’ liberties and agreed that their correspondence might help frustrate it.¹

¹ Arthur Lee to Samuel Adams, 31 Dec 1770, in Richard Henry Lee, Life of Arthur Lee, LL.D., joint commissioner of the United States to the court of France, and sole commissioner to the courts of Spain and Prussia, during the Revolutionary War; with his political and literary correspondence and his papers on diplomatic and political subjects, and the affairs of the United States during the same period (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1829), 1:249ff and Adams to Lee, 19 Apr 1771, Samuel Adams, The Writings of Samuel Adams, ed. Henry Alonzo Cushing (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), 2:165. Lee was more correct than he knew: in 1770, Hutchinson initiated secret correspondences with several other colonial governors, including Governor John Penn of Pennsylvania and Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden of New York: see Richard Brown, Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 35.
As Lee’s letter suggests, the early 1770s was a very difficult period for the inter-colonial patriot movement and the Boston Sons in particular. Even Samuel Cooper, an enthusiastic affiliate of the Boston Sons of Liberty, admitted in early 1771 that a “pause in politics” had settled over the colonies. The Sons considered the British government’s retreat from the Townshend Acts and the end of non-importation a partial victory at best. But repeal had deprived radical patriots of their most popular issue in the colonies and the Sons lamented the sudden lack of enthusiasm for further opposition to Britain among the general population.

Writing for a committee of the town of Boston, Samuel Adams regretted that “In general Individuals” were “following their private concerns” and paying little attention to politics. The nearly simultaneous collapse of the Wilksite movement in England left the Sons feeling they were isolated within the broader empire as well.

For the Sons of Liberty, then, the task during 1770-1772 was figuring out how to reignite the colonies’ resistance—or at least carry on until circumstances offered them a new unifying

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3 Samuel Cooper to Benjamin Franklin, 1 Jan 1771, in Benjamin Franklin et al., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959-), 18:3.

issue. The Boston Sons responded to this challenge by turning what could have been the greatest weakness of their political networks, its focus on information transmission rather than debate and tactical discussion, into an asset. Beginning with their response to the Boston Massacre and through a series of subsequent crises in 1771 and 1772, the Boston Sons used their long distance correspondence networks to manage the flow of information about the Massachusetts resistance movement around the Atlantic, inciting renewed outrage across the colonies. Indeed, they were so successful that by early 1773, when news of a new British tax measure, the Tea Act, reached America, the colonies were already in an uproar.

This chapter first examines the role that private correspondence and epistolary codes of conduct played in the Boston Sons’ efforts to manage the flow of information around the Atlantic. It looks at the two most significant crises that shook the Bay Colony: the aftermath of the Boston Massacre (1770-1771) and the publication of a collection of Governor Thomas Hutchinson’s secret correspondence in 1773. In the first episode, we see the Sons experimenting with different ways of countering their opponents’ powerful networks of private correspondence. The patriots’ strategies illuminate the complex relationship between public and private letter writing and the sphere of print media. The second episode illustrates the central role that epistolary codes of conduct played at an important turning point in the development of the revolutionary movement. The heart of the Hutchinson letters crisis was a dispute over how to interpret the rules for writing, reading and sharing letters, and which practices for authenticating and publishing them ought to be applied to a packet of purloined letters.

The final section of the chapter examines the formation of tighter bonds among patriots within Massachusetts during these years, culminating in the 1772 creation of the Boston Committee of Correspondence (BCC), which can be seen as the first formally constituted Sons
organization. It shows that these networks enabled the Massachusetts patriot party to engage in a level of tactical and strategic discussion that (as the previous chapter showed) was not yet possible on an inter-colonial level. The tightly-knit movement that Massachusetts patriots created, a development mirrored in a number of other colonies during these years, provided the foundation for the formal inter-colonial Sons network that from 1773 on waged an increasingly coordinated campaign against British imperial governance.

The Boston Massacre: truth and untruth around the Atlantic

The death of five Boston men on March 5, 1770, at the hands of British troops—the event that would come to be known to every elementary schoolchild in the United States as the Boston Massacre—presented the Boston Sons with a unique and novel challenge as the creaky infrastructure of the non-importation agreements began to totter.5 The Massacre and the town’s reaction to it marked significant escalations in the confrontation between crown and colony: the first time serious violence had been exercised by the government against patriots, the first Boston fatalities, and the first effort by patriots to prosecute British soldiers in civil court for their actions.6 The Boston Sons knew that their opponents would accuse them of having fomented

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these escalations in an effort to drive apart colonies and mother country, and they sensed that it was imperative for them to shift the blame away from themselves. But how should they go about convincing people far away that their accounts of events were the most truthful, especially since they knew that their opponents would be trying to do the same thing?

In 1770 and early 1771, the Boston Sons undertook a campaign to prove Boston’s blamelessness to the Anglo-American world. Because London and its presses occupied a central place in the colonial news and opinion circuit, the Sons focused their efforts as much on the metropole as on the other colonies. The Sons first adopted a strategy of public letter writing, which sought to use the power of public letters and print culture to counter the insidious influence of their opponents’ private letters around the Atlantic. Though this strategy met with some early success, however, the Sons found that it could not effectively counter the growing flood of public pro-government propaganda. So they returned to private letter writing to further press their case. New mercantile-style networks proved to be an important element of their efforts to mold public opinion in England and the colonies, which met with increasingly success in 1771 and 1772.

Ironically, the Sons let their opponents take the lead in communicating the events of March 5 beyond the province of Massachusetts. Just as Lee would describe them doing in his

letter several months later, the “friends of government” (as they liked to call themselves) employed private correspondence to spread their version of what had happened. On the 6th, then-acting governor Thomas Hutchinson wrote a thorough description of the killings and the town’s response in a private letter to Thomas Gage, then the commander of British forces based in New York. Hutchinson also assured Gage that he would be writing to London at the earliest possible opportunity. This letter reached New York via express along with a clutch of others sent to Gage by military officers serving in Massachusetts.7 At the same time, Hutchinson and his allies prepared to send a messenger to London, customs commissioner John Robinson, with an account and depositions painting the soldiers in a positive light and blaming the townsmen for the fracas.8

Hutchinson and the officers most likely decided to communicate their accounts of the Massacre privately for reasons that had little to do with the politics of information; yet their choice shaped the way the Sons sought to advance their account. For Hutchinson, who had not been an eyewitness to the events on the night of March 5th, his letters seem to have been primarily aimed at clearing himself of any blame for what had happened. He told Gage about the events only “so far as they respect…my own conduct,” offering a detailed disculpatory account of his actions.9 Lieutenant colonels Dalrymple and Carr, for their part, sent private letters because that was the protocol for reporting to a superior officer.10 (Dalrymple also sent private

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8 Zobel, The Boston Massacre, 212-213.

9 Hutchinson to Gage, 6 Mar 1770, in Adams, New Light, 270.

10 Dalrymple to Gage, 8 Mar 1770, in Ibid., 279.
letters to some colleagues in England, which the press quoted a few times.\textsuperscript{11} Yet because they were private and hidden from the view of the broader public, their letters had the potential to shape the coverage of the Massacre in ways that the Sons could not predict.

Though Boston patriots felt threatened and frightened by the secret correspondence flowing outward from the friends of governments’ pens, in the short term they let their opponents take the initiative. In the wake of the shootings, the self-identified Sons of Liberty reassumed their prior mantle as the leaders of the Boston resistance, taking over from the individuals who had led the merchants’ committee in 1768-1769.\textsuperscript{12} For the first several days after the shootings, though, the Sons were too busy managing the response to the Massacre in the town itself to work on how it was being received in the outside world. Their hands were full with organizing town meetings, petitioning the colonial government to take action and shaping the behavior of the large crowds that repeatedly formed in the streets.\textsuperscript{13}

A week after the Massacre, the Sons finally took up the problem of communicating with the outside world. On March 12, a town meeting met and appointed a committee to write an open letter to Thomas Pownall, a former governor of the province, now in London, who was allied with several of the patriot leaders. (Of the seven members of this committee, four had not

\textsuperscript{11}At least one of Dalrymple’s private letters was quoted in London news reprinted in the South-Carolina \textit{Gazette}, 5 Jul 1770.


been members of the merchants’ committee in January.)\textsuperscript{14} The letter drew on a tradition of public letter-writing that the Sons had inaugurated in the early days of the resistance movement, discussed in the previous chapter. It also recalled the circular letter that the Sons had persuaded the Massachusetts House to dispatch to the other colonial assemblies in 1768, condemning the Townshend Acts.\textsuperscript{15} The committee explained that the letter’s purpose was to get Pownall to counter any negative publicity while they worked on producing a “full representation” of the Massacre and the events surrounding it. They hoped he would “prevent any ill impressions from being made” by the accounts “our…enemies may send.”\textsuperscript{16}

Even in this missive, though merely a stopgap measure, the Boston Sons attempted to create an impression of veracity and reliability around their letter. They were at pains to emphasize that they acted as the committee of a formally-constituted body (the Boston town meeting), which they affirmed by describing themselves as agents of “The town of Boston…legally convened…”\textsuperscript{17} They offered a brief account of the events leading up the massacre, providing a firsthand narrative of the events in question.\textsuperscript{18} The most curious truth-

\textsuperscript{14} See Boston Town Committee to Thomas Pownall, 12 Mar 1770, in John Doggett, ed. \textit{A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston: Perpetrated in the Evening of the Fifth Day of March, 1770, by Soldiers of the 29th Regiment, which with the 14th Regiment Were Then Quartered There...} (New York: John Doggett, Jr., 1849), 7-8. For the names of the merchants’ committee, see Various to Dennys de Berdt, 30 Jan 1770, Miscellaneous Bound Documents 1770-1773, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. On Pownall, see Bailyn, \textit{Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson}, 43-44.

\textsuperscript{15} On the 1768 circular, see Chapter 1 and Schlesinger, \textit{Colonial Merchants}, 111-113.

\textsuperscript{16} See Doggett, ed. \textit{Short Narrative}, 8

\textsuperscript{17} According to the Pennsylvania \textit{Gazette}, 5 Jul 1770, the Pownall letter was published in the London newspapers, along with the Boston committee’s account, shortly after they both arrived in England. The news was quickly reprinted elsewhere: Dublin \textit{Mercury}, 1-3 May 1770.

\textsuperscript{18} Doggett, ed. \textit{Short Narrative}, 7-8.
making strategy they employed was the unique valediction with which they ended their letter: they signed themselves “with strict truth.” Samuel Adams had invented this sign-off in 1766 but had not used it in several years. Now the Sons adopted it as a way to assert the reliability and trustworthiness of the letter’s testimony against that of their opponents’ letters.19

Having dispatched this missive, the Sons’ mission was now to produce and disseminate a persuasive vindication of the Bostonians’ conduct as quickly as possible. Time was of the essence. The patriots were aware that Hutchinson and his allies were already spreading the news of the Massacre to the other colonies. The same day they wrote to Pownall, the Sons formed a committee of three to produce a fuller report on the Massacre. None of its members—James Bowdoin, Joseph Warren and Samuel Pemberton—had been part of the committee of merchants.20 They worked feverishly, taking testimony from every witness they could find. Their work accelerated when they discovered, on or shortly after the 16th, that John Robinson had slipped off to England with dispatches.21 They finished their report and presented it to a new town meeting on March 19th, which voted to publish it under the name *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston* and dispatch copies to six powerful American agents and allies of the patriot party in London.22

19 Ibid., 8. This valediction, which is unique to the Sons of Liberty as far as I have been able to tell, probably originated with Samuel Adams. He had used it at least once before, in a 1766 letter to Dennys De Berdt: see SA to De Berdt, 8 Dec 1766, Adams, *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 1:108. On valedictions, see below note 53.


21 Robinson’s departure is noted in their letters: see Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, 212-213.

22 Doggett, ed. *Short Narrative*, 12. These letters were essentially public documents, in light of their style and the fact that they were mentioned in the printed *Narrative*. There were also actual private letters that spread the news of the Massacre to England, but these were for the most part extremely brief and largely limited themselves to the barest of narratives of the events. See letters, probably commercial correspondence, excerpted in the *Public Advertiser* (London), 23
The *Short Narrative* is a fascinating document from the point of view of information transmission and authentication. The committee’s first and perhaps most important choice in the *Narrative* was to present their account as hyper-factual. Indeed, it might be more accurate to describe the pamphlet as a document collection rather than a *Narrative*. The actual narrative portion of the pamphlet, which recounted the Massacre and the weeks leading up to it in the committee’s own voice, took up a scant six pages. Most of the remaining thirty-six pages of the “narrative” itself were simply summaries of witnesses’ depositions. “George Coster being in King-street at the time above mentioned,” began a typical passage, “declares that in five or six minutes after he stopped, he heard the word of command given to the soldiers *fire*.” Attached to this already testimony-heavy document was an eighty-eight page appendix of raw depositions, each carefully numbered and indexed. The *Short Narrative* thus claimed to speak primarily in the voices of eyewitnesses, not those of the committee itself.

The committee bookended this collection of testimonies with a series of official certifications attesting to its authenticity. The pamphlet began with page-sized reprints of the warrants authorizing the town meeting, the formation of the committee and the town’s vote to endorse the pamphlet itself. The appendix contained three types of certification. First, Richard Dana and John Hill, justices of the peace, formally confirmed that their opponents had been invited to cross-examine the witnesses but had decided not to take advantage of that opportunity. All of the justices of the peace who were involved in gathering the testimony then offered their

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Apr 1770, p.2. The third letter writer indicates that he is a merchant by hoping that “God” will soon “compose the Minds of this unhappy Town again to business.” See also the letter excerpted in London *Evening Post*, 24-26 Apr 1770.

23 *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston: Perpetrated in the Evening of the Fifth Day of March, 1770, by Soldiers of the 29th Regiment, which with the 14th Regiment Were Then Quartered There...* (Boston: Edes & Gill, 1770), 14.
certification that the printed copy conformed to the transcripts of the interrogations. A final page offered Hutchinson’s certification that the justices of the peace held their offices legally and that their acts were entitled to “full Faith and Credit.” The same page noted that there were three copies of the original of Hutchinson’s affidavit, two of which they sent to England and one of which remained “with the Committee.”

The many attestations to the veracity of materials in the Short Narrative reveal as well the Sons’ nervousness about their use of public media in this case. Publication, of course, ensured that the Sons’ account of the Massacre would receive wider attention and allowed it to be republished more easily, increasing its circulation. The fact of being printed itself may have added a veneer of authority to the account it presented, though this effect is difficult to quantify. But printing also had a downside: without the clues provided by manuscript, from the signatures and seals to the very paper on which it was written, truth and falsehood in a printed document could be harder to discern. Printing the Narrative opened the Sons to the charge, which they were at pains to refute, that they had manipulated or even falsified the testimonies. The Narrative was a calculated gamble, in other words, which sought to create maximum publicity without losing the authenticity of manuscript.

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24 Ibid., 80.

Initially, at least, it seemed that the Boston Sons’ gamble had paid off. The patriots’
English allies followed the lead of their Boston counterparts and emphasized the veracity of the
Boston committee’s account. “Junius Americanus,” which Arthur Lee and Stephen Sayre shared
as a pseudonym, published an essay on May 1st in a London paper questioning the veracity of
the account sent by Hutchinson. “By whom is it authenticated,” “Junius” asked rhetorically.
“By whom is it signed?” He argued strenuously that because the Hutchinson account was
anonymous, its veracity was uncertain and unverifiable and thus should not be given “the least
credit.” Conversely, some London papers described the town committee’s pamphlet as an
“authenticated Narrative” and were impressed by its marshaling of nearly a hundred eyewitness
testimonies. They also enjoyed some success in convincing newspapers in other colonies to
republish pieces of the Short Narrative and other materials retailing the Boston town meeting’s
version of events.

The success of the Short Narrative and its strategy of public argument by the Sons,
however, proved to be rather limited in the face of the concerted campaign undertaken by the
friends of government. Days after Dalrymple’s reports reached London, they were published in
the Public Advertiser. In Parliament, the ministry produced Hutchinson’s letters and other

27 “Junius Americanus,” Essex Gazette, 3-10 Jul 1770.
28 Boston Post-Boy, 18 Jun 1770.
29 See, e.g., Pennsylvania Gazette, 22 Mar 1770; South Carolina Gazette, 5 Apr 1770; Virginia
Gazette, 5 Apr 1770; as well as Robert W. Smith, “What Came After?: News Diffusion and the
Significance of the Boston Massacre, 1770-1775,” Journalism History 3, no. 3 (1976).
30 See Franklin et al., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 17:186.
documents, “Conceal[ing] the Names of the Persons” who wrote them. Perhaps the most
damaging report was “The Case of Captain Thomas Preston,” a letter from the officer who had
commanded the troops who fired on the Boston townspeople. Preston’s letter claimed that the
townspeople had provoked his troops to fire. This letter soon made its way back across the
Atlantic and into colonial newspapers up and down the seaboard. By the beginning of July,
patriot minister Samuel Cooper was writing to complain to Pownall about “how basely the
bloody affair of the 5th March has been Misrepresented in the London Papers.”

On July 6th, an anonymous author in London published a pro-government narrative of
the Massacre, called A Fair Account of the Late Unhappy Disturbances at Boston…. The
author of the Fair Account took the Short Narrative as his model: he began with a history of the
Massacre and the events leading up to it and then provided a nearly equal number of pages of
testimony and supporting documents. The author even aped the patriots’ use of official seals and
attestations to authenticate the testimony. This and other representations by the friends of
government became increasingly influential in British and even colonial public opinion. James

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31 Ibid., 17:187.
32 See, e.g., Pennsylvania Gazette, 5 Jul 1770. For a discussion of the authenticity of this letter,
see Zobel, The Boston Massacre, 235-236.
33 Cooper to Pownall, 2 Jul 1770, in Frederick Tuckerman, “Letters of Samuel Cooper to Thomas
34 For the date of publication, see Public Advertiser (London), 6 Jul 1770.
35 See A Fair Account of the Late Unhappy Disturbance at Boston in New England; Extracted
from the Depositions That Have Been Made Concerning It … With an Appendix, (London: B.
White, 1770), Appendix p. 25.
Bowdoin, the author of the *Narrative*, was reported to have complained that the *Fair Account* had “defeated every thing we aimed at by the Narrative and the Depositions sent home.”

Recognizing that their efforts to shape British and inter-colonial opinion through public media had not been as successful as they had hoped, the Boston Sons turned back to their tried and true weapon, the private letter. Over the next year, the Sons—especially Samuel Adams—undertook a campaign of private letter writing intended to advance their view of the Boston Massacre and the imperial crisis more broadly to writers and opinion-makers outside of Massachusetts. They aimed not just to change the opinion of ministers but also to engage “the body of the people on our side”—or, as the town of Boston grandly proclaimed, to establish “truth in the Minds of honest Men” in England. Their private letters, they clearly hoped, would influence how those who received them spoke and wrote about the Massacre to the English public.

As Thomas Cushing explained in one letter, it was “certainly very cruel & unjust that the state & circumstances of the province should be collected from the evidence of Bernard, Robinson & other expectants & dependants … & it will still be more cruel if the parliament should take for fact what they have represented to be so.” Two individuals, Stephen Sayre and Arthur Lee, were at the heart of the patriots’ efforts to ensure that this did not happen.

Mercantile correspondence habits pervaded the Boston Sons’ new trans-Atlantic correspondence network. The leading men involved, including Sayre, Lee, Adams and Thomas Cushing, were all merchants or individuals with close ties to merchants. Sayre, a New Yorker

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37 Stephen Sayre (London) to SA, 5 Jun 1770, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL and Committee of the Town of Boston to Franklin, 13 Jul 1770, in Franklin et al., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 17:187. See also the draft of the latter in Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL.

38 Cushing to Stephen Sayre, 6 Nov 1770, Miscellaneous Bound Documents 1770-1773, MHS.
from an artisan family, had gone to the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), entered commerce, and prospered after he moved to England in the mid-1760s. Lee was a scion of a prominent Virginia merchant-planter family who had gone to England for his studies and stayed on as a political gadfly and opposition writer. Both men had been writing for several years already in favor of the American cause under the pseudonym “Junius Americanus.” They used the same paper and format and were of roughly the same length as commercial letters. The letters between the principals traveled via messenger, as was characteristic of mercantile correspondence. Most of the Adams-Sayre letters, for instance, were carried by a merchant, Richard Cary of Charlestown, Massachusetts. These intermediaries, as was also habitual in the mercantile world, often carried important verbal messages that complemented the letters’ written content. Sayre, for instance, started his first letter to Adams by saying that he had “desired Mr [Richard] Cary, who will deliver you this letter to inform you, that my poor endeavours have on all occasions been exerted to vindicate the conduct of my fellows subjects in America.”


41 For carriage and lengths, see Stephen Sayre to SA, 5 Jun 1770, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL; Stephen Sayre to SA, 18 Sep 1770, Ibid.; and SA to Stephen Sayre, 16 Nov 1770, in Adams, *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 2:57. The fact that the letters looked physically like commercial correspondence is not an accident. When writing to English opposition figure John Wilkes in the late 1760s, the Sons had adopted a very different epistolary style, using formal language, large sheets of paper and highly-wrought calligraphy. See Ford, ed., Worthington Chauncey Ford, “John Wilkes and Boston,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* XLVII (1914): esp. 191, and the original letters in Add Mss 30870: General Correspondence of John Wilkes, British Library. The first one is finely calligraphed on a large (15 x 12 inch) sheet of fine paper with enlarged initial letters for each paragraph; subsequent ones are on smaller sheets but use similarly careful calligraphy and formal language.

42 Stephen Sayre to SA, 5 Jun 1770, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL.
Similarly, the trusted Captain Scott, who carried many of their letters, was himself a small-scale political actor and was known to carry verbal messages among the Sons.\textsuperscript{43}

As they had during the Stamp Act crisis, the patriot correspondents also adopted a reportorial voice with one another, announcing what they had done and approving of one another’s measures but not making suggestions or offering advice. Consensus was the order of the day: in his early correspondence with Sayre, Adams missed no opportunity to concur. “I am perfectly of your Opinion that no man shd be the object of our Choice who holds any place at the Will of the present Administration,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{44} Adams was similarly agreeable with Lee. In 1771, he responded to a long letter by stating that his sentiments “perfectly correspond[ed]” with his. “The opinion you have formd of the ruling men on both sides the Atlantick,” he went on, “is exactly mine.”\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, the power of politeness was so great that when Adams did finally disagree with Lee for the first time—in November, 1772—he did so only at the end of a letter and in the subjunctive at that. Responding to Lee’s wish that a particularly hostile British government official would be removed from office, he noted apologetically that “I could not joyn with you” in hoping for that to happen.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} For the close relationships between the Sons and Scott, see William M. Fowler, \textit{The Baron of Beacon Hill: A Biography of John Hancock} (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 69 and 158. See also Palfrey (London) to Hancock, 4 Feb 1771, Palfrey Family Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University. For his transmission of secret message, see Palfrey (London) to Hancock, 26 Feb 1771, Ibid. Scott later married John Hancock’s widow: see Harlow G. Unger, \textit{John Hancock: Merchant King and American Patriot} (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 335.

\textsuperscript{44} SA to Stephen Sayre, 23 Nov 1770, in Adams, \textit{Writings of Samuel Adams}, 2:66, 68.

\textsuperscript{45} SA to Arthur Lee, 27 Sep 1771, in Ibid., 2:231.

\textsuperscript{46} SA to Arthur Lee, 3 Nov 1772, in Ibid., 2:345.
The absence of debate in the correspondence of Sayre and Lee with their Boston counterparts is striking given its pervasiveness in the parallel trans-Atlantic exchanges that took place between American colonists and their agents in London. These letters followed different epistolary conventions because they translated a different social relationship, that between client and agent: an agent was professionally obliged to give an honest opinion and to offer advice. In their private letters to Boston patriots, Massachusetts colonial agents Dennys De Berdt and Benjamin Franklin freely and openly offered their advice on the best political course to follow. Indeed, even politeness often took a back seat to persuasion in these exchanges. In a June, 1768, letter to Thomas Cushing, De Berdt observed (with perhaps a hint of peevishness) that he “wish[ed] that things on your Side were carried on with a more steady & silent perseverance [sic].” More specifically, he urged the House to not pursue further a dispute with Parliament about the dispatch of soldiers to America. “To me it appears prudent,” he wrote, “as you have so fully entered your protest with regard to your Right, to drop that dispute for the present.”

Though Franklin offered different advice a few years later, urging Cushing to make sure that the colonial assemblies showed “by frequently repeated resolves, that they know their rights,” the tone of his letters was the same as that of De Berdt’s. He also gave a detailed tactical analysis of how best to get a positive response to those petitions.

The Boston Sons and their English correspondents sought to prove that the information they were sharing was truthful and trustworthy. Of course, they used the same kinds of

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49 BF to Cushing, 5 Feb 1771, in Franklin et al., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 18:27-29.
techniques they had employed before—sending printed documents, working hard to generate verisimilitude in their account—but they also spent more time than they had before on simply asserting their truthfulness. Writing to Adams, Sayre offered to give him “intellegience [sic] … relative to public affairs” and assured him that “I will never deceive you in matter of fact, or hint suspicions, without the best foundations.” Adams, for his part, began using a new valediction, “in strict truth,” as a regular part of his epistolary practice. It appeared at the end of the Boston town committee’s collective letter to Benjamin Franklin in July, 1770; on Adams’s first letters to Sayre and John Wilkes; and in various missives he sent to Arthur Lee and others. “I fear I have tried your patience,” he wrote at the end of one of these letters, “& conclude by assuring you that I am in strict Truth, Sir, Your friend & hume servt.”

We should not underestimate the importance or power of Adams’s ingenious reinvention of the valediction. Though modern readers tend to treat them as an afterthought, valedictions were quite important in early modern epistolary practice. They were traditionally a crucial indicator of the relationship between the sender and recipient, which writers habitually used to express social distance or closeness. By turning it into an assertion of truthfulness, Adams forcefully and originally placed truthfulness at the heart of his relationship with his correspondents. Moreover, though Adams invented this particular technique, it had precedents

50 Stephen Sayre (London) to SA, 18 Sep 1770, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL.

51 SA to various correspondents, 1770-1771, in Adams, Writings of Samuel Adams, 2:18, 61, 101, 237, 257, 339, 9.

52 SA to Arthur Lee, 27 Sept 1771, in Ibid., 1:37.

53 See Eve Tavor Bannet, Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 63-69 and Giora Sternberg, “Epistolary Ceremonial: Corresponding Status at the Time of Louis XIV,” Past and Present, no. 204 (Aug., 2009): 61-63. Given the obvious importance that early modern writers attached to salutations and valedictions, it is remarkable how little work has been done on the topic.
in scientific correspondence. Early modern scientists, particularly those who worked in “big sciences” such as cartography or tropical biology, dealt constantly with the problem of managing factual testimony at a distance. One of the ways that scientists assured others of the veracity of their truth claims was by asserting that they were true. For Adams, too, asserting his truthfulness could be a key part of producing political “matters of fact.”

The exchange of information, though without any particular effort at strategic coordination, soon contributed to a palpable strengthening of the patriot movement on both sides of the Atlantic. In June, 1771, Lee offered Adams early news of the rising of Parliament and an explanation for why (this session, at least) it had not passed any measures offensive to America. In his reply, Adams declared himself “greatly indebted” for the news. Adams sent Sayre recently published papers relating to the trial of Captain Preston in an early 1771 letter, which he used in his public writings. And in a missive later the same year to Lee, Adams forwarded a copy of a Massachusetts Council resolution censuring “Junius Americanus.” His letter offered a detailed explanation of how the Council had managed to pass the censure over the patriot party’s objections, which he hoped would mitigate the impact the news had when it...

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57 SA to Sayre, 12 Jan 1771, in Ibid., 2:134-135.
arrived in England. Adams repeatedly expressed his “impatien[ce]” to receive letters from Lee; he “beg[ged]” him to “omit no Opportunity of writing.” In late 1772, he pronounced himself “disappointed if I do not receive a letter from you by every vessel that arrives here.”

The steady stream of information from New England helped Sayre and Lee hammer home the Boston Sons’ view of the American crisis, and of the Boston Massacre in particular, in 1771 and even into 1772. Lee was one of the most prolific pro-American pamphleteers in England and the information which the Boston Sons supplied him fed directly into his publications. After the London papers published news of the Massachusetts Council’s censure of “Junius Americanus,” for instance, “A Bostonian” responded in the London Gazetteer in December, 1771, with the news (which Adams had sent privately to Lee) that most of the members of the Council had been absent at the time. “Junius” himself continued to hammer home the unreliability of the censure vote and to blame the ministry for the massacre. In January, 1772, he accused the ministry of using a “very thin Council in Boston, to impeach my veracity” and reiterated his accusation that the British army had caused the “ever memorable massacre…at Boston.” In August, “Junius” was still berating the ministry for having listened to the “misrepresentation[s]” forwarded by Hutchinson and other Massachusetts friends of government about the Massacre. Probably drawing on information from private letters, he

60 On his pamphlet production, see Potts, Arthur Lee, Ch. 3, esp. 73-74. Under the pseudonym “Junius Americanus,” he was recognized as one of the main voices of the Boston patriots.
expressed particular anger at their supposed use of “ex postea affidavits, secretly and suspiciously taken, with forged informations from anonymous correspondents.”

As the Sons had hoped, their efforts to control the flow of information to England also had a powerful return effect in the colonies. As they well knew, Lee had strong links to the patriot party in Virginia. His brother, Richard Henry Lee, was one of the most prominent figures in the Virginia patriot movement: he had been active since the Stamp Act crisis and had played a crucial role in leading his colony into joining the non-importation resolutions in 1769. Lee’s private correspondence and his public writings, especially the “Junius” letters, soon become a “primary source of information on British affairs pertinent to the American resistance” for those in his native province. By mid-1771, “Junius’s” letters were also regularly appearing in the American press, where they provided seemingly independent confirmation of the patriot-driven news pouring out of Massachusetts.

Though the news of the Boston Massacre did not reignite the fervor of the inter-colonial and trans-Atlantic patriot movement, as some Boston Sons hoped, neither did it become a serious liability for the patriot party. That the patriot movement weathered this first armed confrontation with the empire was due in no small measure to the Boston Sons’ successful

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65 Potts, Arthur Lee, 65.

66 See, e.g., Virginia Gazette, 20 Jun 1771, 31 Oct 1771 and 27 Feb 1772.

efforts to disseminate their account of the events in King Street. The Sons realized early on in the crisis that their central problem was not spreading an ideology but conveying favorable information to the Anglo-American public, which they believed was sympathetic to their ideas but somewhat skeptical about their intentions and methods. To do so, they had to use correspondence and the print media to manage the flow of information from Massachusetts and back to the other colonies.

The efforts of the Boston Sons to manage the flow of information show the central role that private correspondence played in their political practice. In the case of the Massacre, private letter writing in the end proved crucial to the patriot party’s resilience and strength—enabling them to counter the friends of government when print seemed to have failed. Their initial efforts to counter the friends of governments’ private letter writing with public media did not meet with the success they had hoped. So they quickly shifted back to private correspondence, adapting it to serve as an instrument for authenticating their account of events. As this information made its way out into the public sphere through the “Junius” articles and other routes, it enabled the Boston patriot leaders to counter their opponents at their own game: now it was they whose “union” and “secrecy” enabled them to turn opinion around the Anglo-American Atlantic in their favor.

The case of the purloined letters, 1772-1773

As the conflicts between Boston and the imperial administration ground on into 1771 and 1772, Boston patriots and their correspondents became increasingly eager not just to advance their own interpretation of events but to actively discredit that of their opponents. If patriots thought of their letters as vehicles for conveying the truth, they imagined the letters of their
opponents as an unstoppable flurry of evil untruths. By keeping their letters secret and only
selectively sharing the information they contained, the friends of government were able to shape
public opinion while concealing their wicked designs from public view. But what if those
schemes were exposed, the patriots wondered? They could lay bare the self-interested or
duplicitous dealings of the friends of government, discrediting them and their factual claims.
And the very epistolary forms that allowed the friends of government to hatch their schemes also
offered the patriots the opportunity to expose and destroy them: the letters themselves could be
brought as witnesses against their authors.

In two connected incidents in Rhode Island and Massachusetts during late 1772 and early
1773, the Boston Sons turned the correspondence of the friends of government against them,
creating a controversy that echoed around the Atlantic and helped to revive the patriot
movement. Though letters were at the heart of both of these affairs, scholars have paid little
attention to the ways in which epistolary habits and expectations contributed to the development
of the crisis. Most of the scholarship has focused on the letters’ ideological content or its
eventual political repercussions. Yet for the actors in this trans-Atlantic drama, the fact that they
were arguing over letters mattered a great deal. Epistolary codes of conduct dictated how
patriots transmitted the letters and how they thought they could use them. And their beliefs
about the differences among epistolary genres helped to determine the meanings that political
activists on both sides of the issue assigned to them.

The affair of the purloined letters grew out of the ongoing confrontation between the
Massachusetts House and Hutchinson. Hutchinson had been a thorn in the patriots’ side since
the mid-1760s, but the conflict between them had grown more heated in recent years. In the
wake of the Boston Massacre, in May, 1770, Hutchinson had forced the Massachusetts General
Court to move its meetings to Cambridge in the hopes that this would rob the Boston Sons of their stranglehold over the House. This dispute dragged on for nearly two years, with speeches and pamphlets on both sides, but Hutchinson proved unmovable. When he finally allowed them to go to Boston, in June, 1772, he began a new crisis by revealing that the British government had created a Massachusetts civil list, which would pay the salaries of the governor and judges of the colony, thus making them independent of the House.68

Though the House and its new agent, Benjamin Franklin, still thought that the problems in colonial relations were primarily a product (as Franklin put it) of “ignorance of our situation, circumstances, abilities, temper” in Parliament, Hutchinson’s intransigence made them wonder whether the misunderstanding were really so innocent.69 Franklin in particular became convinced that Hutchinson himself and some of his cronies were deliberately sabotaging the relationship between Massachusetts and the mother country. In December, he wrote to Cushing to tell him that “there [has] lately fallen into my Hands Part of a Correspondence” from Hutchinson and his political allies (particularly his brother-in-law, Andrew Oliver) which “I have reason to believe laid the Foundation of most if not all our present Grievances.” The letters, which Hutchinson and his allies had written in a strikingly unguarded manner, were tailor-made to infuriate Massachusetts patriots. Particularly incendiary were his remarks which suggested that it would be necessary to limit “English liberties” in the colonies in order to maintain their bond with the mother country.70 Franklin enclosed the original letters “to obviate every Pretence

68 See Bailyn, Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson, 170-195 and William Gordon, The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America Including an Account of the Late War, and of the Thirteen Colonies, from Their Origin to That Period (New York: John Woods, 1801).

69 BF to Cushing, 13 Apr 1772, in Franklin et al., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 19:104.

70 For a discussion of the letters, see Bailyn, Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson, 225-228.
of Unfairness in Copying, Interpolation or Omission,” with the proviso that they “not be printed, nor any Copies taken of the whole or any part of it.”\textsuperscript{71} Cushing received the letters in late March, 1773, and for several months followed Franklin’s directive that they be seen only in the original manuscript form, by a select group of gentlemen, and not copied or published.\textsuperscript{72}

Franklin’s motives in sending these letters has long been a subject of considerable speculation and debate.\textsuperscript{73} Most modern scholars have been incredulous, to one degree or another, of Franklin’s claim that he never intended the letters to be published. Edmund Morgan scoffed that Franklin “could scarcely have expected that the letters would not become common knowledge.”\textsuperscript{74} Likewise, historians have been openly doubtful of Franklin’s professions of surprise, after the letters became public, that anyone thought he had done wrong. “He knew he had no right to complain if he were accused of getting the letters dishonorably,” Carl Van Doren observed.\textsuperscript{75} Yet given the rules of etiquette that governed American patriots’ epistolary culture, there is good reason to believe that Franklin was sincere on both counts. Far from being obviously disingenuous, Franklin’s request that the letters not be made public was reasonable

\textsuperscript{71} BF to Cushing, 2 Dec 1772, in Franklin et al., \textit{The Papers of Benjamin Franklin}, 19:411-412.

\textsuperscript{72} For the date, see Cushing to BF, 24 Mar 1773, in Ibid., 20:123-125. For Cushing’s assertion that he kept them secret, see Cushing to BF, 14 Jun 1773, in Ibid., 20:235-236. On the process by which they became public, see Samuel Cooper to BF, 14 Jun 1773, in Ibid., 20:233-234, as well as Bailyn, \textit{Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson}, 238-240. For a defense of Adams’s conduct in the matter, see Pauline Maier, \textit{The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams} (New York: Knopf, 1980), 9-10.


\textsuperscript{74} Morgan, \textit{Benjamin Franklin}, 197.

\textsuperscript{75} Van Doren, \textit{Benjamin Franklin}, 474-475. Bernard Bailyn memorably described part of Franklin’s covering letter as “either the most naïve or the most cynical [words] that Franklin ever uttered.” Bailyn, \textit{Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson}, 237.
and justified and his surprise at their publication probably genuine. More importantly, the way
the letters ultimately did become public reveals the importance of epistolary habits during this
key episode in the development of the colonial resistance movement.

When Franklin decided to send the Oliver-Hutchinson letters on to Cushing, he was
engaging in a well established practice. Letter sharing was common among early modern
correspondents.\textsuperscript{76} It seems to be that writers of family or pure familiar correspondence were
more likely to pass around whole letters than were commercial letter writers (a full letter could
divulge sensitive business information, after all). But the practice was far from unknown among
American merchant-patriots. Indeed, the archives of the patriots themselves bear witness to their
participation in it: the papers of William Palfrey and Samuel Adams contain substantial numbers
of letters between third parties, which arrived in those collections by being shared.\textsuperscript{77} Franklin’s
Boston correspondents, moreover, had engaged in letter sharing before. As early as 1769,
Samuel Cooper had been passing certain of Franklin’s full manuscript letters around to “some
particular Friends” and had also “allow[ed] some Extracts to be circulated among the
Merchants.”\textsuperscript{78} With the exception of extracts, these letters had never before ended up in the
newspapers. Franklin was also clear in his December, 1772, cover letter about why he had

\textsuperscript{76} Unfortunately, there is no systematic study of letter sharing in the eighteenth century. For
some examples of letter sharing and copying, see Antoine Lilti, \textit{Le monde des salons : sociabilité

\textsuperscript{77} For Palfrey, see Other Letters from the Papers of William Palfrey, 1741-1781, bMS Am
1704.6, Palfrey Family Papers, Houghton Library, which contains, among other third-party
letters, a 1771 missive from Henry Cruger to Nathaniel Carter. The Samuel Adams Papers (New
York Public Library) contain third-party letters from a number of correspondents including
Samuel Cooper, William Cooper, and New Hampshire patriot William Rand. For some reason,
most of the third-party letters are from the period 1769-1771.

\textsuperscript{78} Samuel Cooper to BF, 3 Aug 1769, in Franklin et al., \textit{The Papers of Benjamin Franklin},
16:182.
dispatched the originals: the goal was to ensure their authenticity by letting readers recognize the “Hands of the Gentlemen” who wrote them.\textsuperscript{79}

The nature of Franklin’s correspondence with Cushing gave him grounds to think that he could send the Oliver-Hutchinson letters to America without fear that they would be published or otherwise disseminated. Cushing and Franklin explicitly framed part of their correspondence as an exchange of letters by private citizens. As he had done with De Berdt, Cushing initiated a correspondence with Franklin as a “private Person” shortly after he began corresponding with him in his official capacity as Speaker of the Massachusetts House. “Such a confidential Correspondence between us I most willingly embrace,” wrote Franklin in response, “to interchange Intelligence that cannot so properly or safely appear in Publick Letters.”\textsuperscript{80} Cushing, for one, expected letters he sent in a private capacity to be treated differently from those in a public capacity. In 1769, after De Berdt had published several of his letters in the newspapers, Cushing wrote to “beg” him to “not publish any more of my letters with my name affixed to them. I wrote to you as a friend & in confidence & with more freedom that I should chuse to do, if I knew my letters were to be in print.”\textsuperscript{81} Writing as one private gentleman to another, Franklin had every reason to think that Cushing would honor his ban on publication, and Cushing himself confirmed that he would “strictly Conform” to Franklin’s orders.\textsuperscript{82}

The letters ended up in print in spite of Cushing’s promise. But how this happened shows not the weakness of epistolary codes but the power they had to mold political action.

\textsuperscript{79} BF to Cushing, 2 Dec 1772, in Ibid., 19:411.
\textsuperscript{80} Franklin to Cushing, 10 Jun 1771, in Ibid., 18:120.
\textsuperscript{81} Cushing (Boston) to Dennys De Berdt, 19 Jan 1768 [i.e., 1769], Miscellaneous Bound Documents, MHS. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{82} See Cushing to BF, 24 Mar 1773, in Franklin et al., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 20:123.
Cushing received the letters at the end of March, 1773, and shortly thereafter letters began arriving from England which informed Massachusetts correspondents about the existence of the Oliver-Hutchinson letters. Yet since Cushing continued to hold the letters themselves back, this was nothing but a vague rumor. Only at the end of May, when copies of the letters mysteriously arrived in Boston aboard one of John Hancock’s ships from England, was “the Matter…publick, and the Restrictions could answer no good end” (as Cooper explained).83 Cushing decided that now that the cat was out of the bag, he had to present the letters to the House.84

At this point, the House was “under some Difficulty” about what to do next, as Cushing put it: they wanted to publish the letters to reveal Hutchinson’s treachery, but they also felt bound to respect the private nature of Cushing’s correspondence with Franklin. A neat bit of sleight of hand, playing with the conventions of truth in correspondence, resolved the problem. Hancock offered his copies of the letters, which had no publication restrictions attached to them, to the House. They then compared the copies to the originals presented by Cushing in order to verify that the copies conformed to the originals (nothing Franklin had said prevented Cushing or the House from using them in that way). Once authenticated, the copies, which had arrived as an unrestricted “public” document, could be printed.85 What is remarkable about this process is not so much the result—the House probably would have found a way to publish the letters regardless—but the method. They went to extraordinary lengths to avoid breaking the rules of

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83 Samuel Cooper to BF, 14 Jun 1773, in Ibid., 20:233. Franklin said that these copies could not have come from England and that the “Rumour” of them was merely “an Expedient to disengage the House” of responsibility for allowing them to be published. BF to Cushing, 25 Jul 1773, Ibid.Franklin et al., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 20:323.

84 Cushing to BF, 14 Jun 1773, in Franklin et al., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 20:237.

85 Cushing to BF, 14 Jun 1773, in Ibid., 20:237-238.
epistolary practice. Cushing’s detailed explanation of the House’s deliberations in a letter to Franklin suggests the importance they attached to conforming to the letter of the epistolary law.  

The publication of the letters from Hutchinson and his allies caused an immediate sensation in Massachusetts, which soon spread back to Britain as well. Hutchinson, for one, instantly found his credibility in tatters. “A sense of outrage swept through the provincial towns” as the published letters circulated. Even patriots in the colonies to the southward, who were not directly affected by the political struggle in Massachusetts or invested in the Hutchinson-hatred of the Boston patriots, reacted to the news strongly. Hutchison burned in effigy up and down the seaboard. The friends of government, for their part, tried to defend Hutchinson as best they could. The most notable effort was a series of newspaper essays written by Massachusetts attorney general Jonathan Sewall under the pseudonym “Philalethes.”

Both attacks on Hutchinson and the attempts to defend him turned on the genre of the letters in question. Sewall returned to the form of the letters as part of his defense: Hutchinson’s missives, he argued, were by “Nature private—written to a Friend in Confidence.” As such, they were being misinterpreted as public documents. Franklin was quick to riposte. In a December, 1773, letter to the editor of the London Chronicle, Franklin defended his decision to send the letters by asserting that they were “not of the nature of “private letters between friends.” They were written by public officers to persons in public station, on public affairs, and intended to procure public measures.”  

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86 Cushing to BF, 14 Jun 1773, in Ibid., 20:235-238.

87 Bailyn, Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson, 240-253.

interpreted as public statements. The government, however, was not convinced: Franklin found himself stripped of his postmaster-generalship and out of favor with the ministry.

Hutchinson and his Massachusetts allies were not the only people to find their reputations deeply sullied by the purloined letters. The packet from Franklin had also contained a letter from George Rome, one of William Palfrey’s main business partners in Rhode Island. Written in December, 1767, during the early stages of the agitation over the Townshend Acts, it expressed his considerable discontent with the colonists, particularly in Rhode Island, and his hostility towards the patriot party. In this one letter, Rome hit almost all the patriot party’s sensitive points. He pronounced the colonies “wrong founded” and wrote that they “ought to all have been regal governments, and every executive officer appointed by the king.” He accused them of disloyalty: “They almost consider themselves as a separate people from Great Britain already.” And he asserted that the patriots were “violent, ruthless and sanguinary” and had perverted the justice system, rendering it “immoderately partial” and “iniquitous.”

Palfrey and Rome’s joint effort to mitigate the impact of this letter sheds further light on the ways that complex epistolary codes figured into patriot politics.

Rome was initially spared the embarrassment of seeing his own intemperate letter made public. The first edition of the incriminating letters, which appeared within a day or two of the


90 On Franklin’s dressing-down, see Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin, 459-478.

91 Copy of a Letter returned with those sign’d Tho. Hutchinson, Andw Oliver, &c., from England [Evans 41763]. Rome had already made himself unpopular by allying with the friends of government known as the Newport Junto. For the background to this letter, see David S. Lovejoy, Rhode Island Politics and the American Revolution, 1760-1776 (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1958), 174-179.
Massachusetts House’s June 15th decision to print them, did not include Rome’s letter. Within ten days, however, a new edition from the same printer added an annex that included the Rome letter along with five letters signed by Thomas Moffat, another Rhode Island merchant. The Massachusetts printers who produced it did not explicitly justify or explain their decision to add the Rome and Moffat letters. However, the addition of missives from two Rhode Islanders suggests that they were pursing a deliberate strategy of trying to embroil Rhode Island in the increasingly heated dispute between the Massachusetts House and Governor Hutchinson.

With Rome’s letter now out in the open, Palfrey tried to help his business partner with damage control. For him, the crucial questions were the same as they had been for the Hutchinson letters: were they incriminating and should they have been printed. Both questions revolved around a judgment about the letters’ genre characteristics. As Palfrey explained:

> Although I have ever been professedly for maintaining & supporting our civil liberties yet I am far from condemning every person that differs with me in sentiment. Every man in my opinion has a right of private judgment… . I am clearly of the opinion that your letter to Mr Moffat being from one private gentleman expressing his sentiments to another without any manifest intention of it going further cannot be chargeable with that degree of criminality with those who wrote with a profess’d design that their letters should take effect.  

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92 On the date, see Bailyn, *Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, 240; for the first edition, see *Copy of Letters Sent...* (Boston, 1773) [Evans 49796].

93 For the publication, see *Copy of Letters Sent...* (Boston, 1773) [Evans 12818]. For the date of publication, see George Rome to Palfrey, 25 Jun 1773, Palfrey Family Papers, Houghton Library. On Moffat, see Lovejoy, *Rhode Island Politics*, 49-51 and 109-112.

Was it a missive “from one private gentleman…to another,” exercising a perfectly reasonable and unimpeachable “right of private judgment” on a matter of public interest? If so, it was protected by the freedom of opinion and the public had no right to see it, and certainly not to have easy access to it in print. Or, on the contrary, was it a letter intended to “effect” a particular political outcome and thus fundamentally a part of public debate and discussion? Palfrey suggested that since the letter was purely private, Rome was within his rights to demand that it not be subjected to further discussion and dissemination.

Rome, who responded by asking Palfrey to get the original letter for him, wanted to use another aspect of eighteenth-century epistolary culture to mitigate the potential impact of his now-public missive. (Rome actually wrote two letters back to Palfrey on the same day, one commercial and one political, showing again the distinction that eighteenth-century merchants drew between epistolary genres.) Though Newporters had so far “behaved extremely well” in the days since his letter had been published, Rome wrote, he was concerned that there might be further “animosity” towards him, perhaps including a legal case for libel. To that end, he wrote, “I shou’d be glad to be possessed of the original letter which wou’d eventually defeat such measures.” As had been the case with the Hutchinson letters themselves, the original manuscript conferred power on the person who held it. With the original in his hands, Rome seems to have thought, he would be able to freely disavow it. If Palfrey were unable to acquire the original letter, Rome added, then he asked him to “please enclose me this, & my other confidential letter [this letter has since been lost], & I’ll take my chance.”

Palfrey, in his response, rejected Rome’s efforts to obscure the provenance or authenticity of the letter and advanced again his idea of using an argument about epistolary genre to blunt its

95 George Rome to Palfrey, 25 Jun 1773, Ibid.
effect. Palfrey regretted that he could not lay his hands on the original letter—his own “utter
ruin would be the inevitable consequence” of even trying to do so, he explained. But he was
willing and able to work harder to prove that Rome’s letter was not a fair object for public
scrutiny. In order to accomplish this, he explained in a letter to Rome, “I wrote & published an
adverizement in Draper’s Paper, and to prevent it being guess’d who was the author dated it as
from Providence.”96 The advertisement claimed that Rome had “not wrote” his letter “to any
person in England, but to Doctor Moffat of New-London, who afterwards, in Breach of private
Confidence, transmitted it to his Friend in London.” The item concluded by arguing that Rome
“cannot therefore be considered so criminal…as those who wrote with a manifest Intention to
injure their Fellow-Citizens, and overturn the Constitution of their Country.”97 Placed in its
proper epistolary context, Palfrey’s piece claimed, Rome’s letter was much less damning than
those written by Hutchinson and his Massachusetts allies. Indeed, he implied, the public should
not even be reading Rome’s letter, which had after all had come into the public domain through a
“Breach of private Confidence.”

In the end, all of Palfrey and Rome’s efforts to blunt the letter’s effects came to nothing.
On July 30th, Rome wrote to Palfrey that “I begin to be apprehensive the town, nor colloney,
don’t want to quarrel wth me.”98 Three weeks later, after several individuals had sued Rome for
libel, the Rhode Island Assembly called him in and demanded that he accept responsibility for
the letter. Rome refused, on the grounds that they could not produce the original letter.99

96 Palfrey to George Rome, n.d., Ibid.


98 George Rome to Palfrey, 30 Jul 1773, Palfrey Family Papers, Houghton Library.

99 Newport Mercury, 8 Nov 1773 and Lovejoy, Rhode Island Politics, 175-176.
Metcalf Bowler, speaker of the Assembly, wrote to Thomas Cushing to tell him about the Rhode Island House of Deputies’ resolves and to ask him had “in behalf of the House to…favour me with the original letter.” But although it was too late—Cushing had sent the original letters back to London just a few days earlier—the Assembly treated the published letter as sufficient proof and slapped Rome in jail. A few years later, he would leave North America forever, one of the thousands of exiles who took the losing side in the imperial conflict.

Though their efforts were not successful, the discussions between Rome and Palfrey, along with the debate over the Hutchinson-Oliver letters, reveal how epistolary codes and habits became an important part of the political process. The nature of epistolary genres and the reading and writing practices that surrounded them could help make or break political action. Nor were questions about the nature of epistolary genre epiphenomenal, related simply to the instrumental question of whether letters would or would not be made public. As the Sewall-Franklin debate and Palfrey’s arguments make clear, even the question of how letters ought to be interpreted revolved around the question of what genre they belonged in.

Towards coordination: creating the Boston Committee of Correspondence

The period from 1770 to 1772, though it brought little change in the nature of inter-colonial correspondence, saw a new model of patriot organizing take shape at the local level. Patriots in Massachusetts increasingly made connections with one another and consolidated a

100 Metcalf Bowler to Thomas Cushing, 20 Aug 73, Miscellaneous Bound Documents, 1770-1773, MHS.

101 Cushing to Bowler, 23 Aug 73, Ibid.

local patriot elite. Having interacted in face-to-face contexts, notably in the General Court, patriot leaders from across Massachusetts were able to use their correspondence as a tool to build a new kind of union, one based on shared political strategy and tactics. This intra-colonial engagement was formalized in 1772 with the creation of the Boston Committee of Correspondence, which soon invited all of the Massachusetts towns to form standing committees to maintain correspondence with Boston. Similar developments took place in other colonies in the same period, though with less intensity. By early 1773, there was a high degree of substantive intra-colonial political communication, which lay the foundations for the explosive growth of tactical coordination at the inter-colonial level beginning in 1773.

The early 1770s brought a new level of integration to Massachusetts politics. The main motor of integration was undoubtedly the House of Representatives, in which many of the leading patriots of the colony served together. In the legislature’s meetings and the social events surrounding it, patriots from across the colony built connections with one another. The conflict between the House and Governor Hutchinson during the early 1770s served to cement these bonds. This was not only because they made political common cause. They were also united by their surprise and even horror at Hutchinson’s dismissive attitude towards them personally. A hint of this comes through in a draft of a letter that Adams wrote to Hutchinson in the early 1770s which accused him of addressing the House with words “replete with falsehood scandal and abuse.” “It has been observed by many,” he went on:

that you have affected an air of superiority over the other branches of the legislature, as though you had never contemplated them as your equals & co-adjustors in the management of the great affairs of the publick, but rather as persons selected from among
the ignorant multitude, whose duty it was, having understanding of their own, implicitly to submit to the dictates of your angelick wisdom.\footnote{SA to Thomas Hutchinson [partial draft], Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL.}


The members of the House thus found themselves bonding with one another in a new way in the early 1770s. Many of them had been acquainted already in the General Court. But their shared revulsion at Hutchinson’s behavior, which was both impolite on a personal level and dismissive of their political importance and role, served to strengthen the connections among them.\footnote{This assessment is borne out by the early historians of the Revolution: Mercy Otis Warren, \textit{History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution: Interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations} (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Classics, 1988), 1:76-77 and Ramsay, \textit{The History of the American Revolution}, 1:47-50. Modern scholars have been more sympathetic to Hutchinson, though they have also seen him as culpable; see especially the balanced judgment in Bailyn, \textit{Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson}, 375-380.}


Though much of the connection among Massachusetts patriots took place within the face-to-face context of the General Court, the new bonds are primarily visible to the historical eye through their correspondences. In some cases, the evidence suggests that important new correspondences among patriots were forged in the crucible of the Court. Elbridge Gerry, for example, was elected to the General Court by the town of Marblehead in May, 1772.\footnote{George Athan Billias, \textit{Elbridge Gerry, Founding Father and Republican Statesman} (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 17.} That session brought a new conflict between Hutchinson and the General Court over news that the salaries of judges in Massachusetts would henceforth be paid directly by the Crown—thus freeing them from local control.\footnote{Richard Bushman, \textit{King and People in Provincial Massachusetts} (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 170-175.} What passed between Adams and the young firebrand Gerry
over the next few months is not known, but by October, when the Court was in recess, the two had begun a regular correspondence that would last years.\textsuperscript{107}

In other cases, the evidence suggests that the struggles within the Court deepened existing relationships. Adams had known James Warren of Plymouth since at least 1765, when he was elected to the General Court during the Stamp Act crisis, and he may have known him even before in one way or another (he was a merchant from the mid-1740s on and married to Mercy Otis, a scion of the politically prominent Otis family).\textsuperscript{108} Their extant correspondence, however, begins only in 1771, with a bracing letter that Adams wrote to Warren, near the low point of the patriot movement’s pre-1773 ebb. “I joyn with you in resolving to persevere with all the little Strength we have and preserve a good Conscience.” Referring to patriots as a “minority,” he urged Warren to stay the course even as “the Multitude desert that Cause.”\textsuperscript{109} The sense of isolation and camaraderie within the patriot party that this letter expresses suggests the increasing internal cohesion of the patriot hard core in 1771 and early 1772.

Just as important, the correspondence of these increasingly integrated patriots took on a dialogic and interactive quality that was still distinctly lacking in inter-colonial correspondence. The young and politically inexperienced Gerry, unsurprisingly, repeatedly solicited Adams’s


advice and deferred to his judgment. “I observe you have taken up the matter in Boston, and we should be glad to second you, but for some difficulties which we want your opinion upon,” he wrote on October 27, 1772.\textsuperscript{110} A few days later, he suggested that rather than petition the Governor to permit the judges to be paid by local appropriations, as the Boston patriots had been doing, they ought to incite the public to shun the judges in question in order to get them to capitulate. But after laying out this plan in some detail, Gerry concluded his letter with the assurance that “I do not so much depend on my own opinion, as I shall on your deliberate sentiments.”\textsuperscript{111}

Gerry’s deference to Adams, though somewhat formulaic, met with serious engagement. In a series of letters in the last three months of the year, Adams responded carefully to Gerry’s many reservations about Boston’s conduct and the tactical challenges facing the patriot party. He countered Gerry’s skepticism about petitions by suggesting that their goal was not so much to get Hutchinson’s assent as to force him to publicly refuse them: “in refusing to comply with them he must have put himself in the wrong, in the opinion of every honest & sensible man.” He closed letters by asking Gerry for his “further sentiments.”\textsuperscript{112} He even awaited Gerry’s opinion at one point on whether to publish the proceedings of a Marblehead town meeting in the Boston newspapers.\textsuperscript{113} Even if it was not by any means perfectly equal, perfectly cohesive, or democratic, there can be no doubt that the early 1770s brought a new level of substantive communication and discussion about tactics and strategy to the Massachusetts patriot movement.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[111] Elbridge Gerry to SA, 2 Nov 1772, in Ibid., 1:12.
\item[112] SA to Gerry, 5 Nov 1772, in Adams, \textit{Writings of Samuel Adams}, 2:346, 348.
\item[113] See SA to Gerry, 23 Dec 1772, in Ibid., 2:388.
\end{footnotes}
Similar developments took place in other colonies about the same time. Overall, the early 1770s saw a closing of old gaps in the patriot coalition as the ranks of active patriots shrank. In New York, the Livingston and DeLancey factions resumed their squabbling after the end of non-importation, but the core leaders of the patriot movement who had bridged the factions in the late 1760s, particularly McDougall and Sears, remained in contact with one another and increasingly aligned with the Livinstonites. In South Carolina and Pennsylvania, the coalition between mechanics and elite radical leaders that had formed in the late 1760s proved to be more than a passing fancy. In both colonies, the diminished patriot ranks cleaved to one another more tightly.

It was in Massachusetts that patriots first took the step of creating an official body to forge a common political line within the space of as single colony. Once again, it was the particularly virulent conflict with Governor Hutchinson that provided the excuse: Hutchinson refused to call a meeting of the Assembly to discuss the issue of a civil list. This gave Adams and his allies the opening they needed to call for a new consultative structure. The Boston Committee of Correspondence was formed at a town meeting on November 2, 1772, and charged with drafting a circular letter giving “the sense of this Town” on the civil list and other issues to all of the other Massachusetts towns and to “request[] of each Town a free communication of

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114 See Maier, *From Resistance to Rebellion*, 223-224.


their Sentiments on this Subject.”118 From the very beginning, in other words, the Boston Committee (or BCC) had as its goal a “free” exchange of views with the Massachusetts towns.

The Boston Committee had a well defined and officially-structured organization like that of the merchants’ committees. It was, first of all, an official committee of a legally recognized body, the Boston town meeting. Second, it had a clearly stated mission, validated by the appropriate authority (the meeting). Third, unlike the loosely structured, fluid Sons of Liberty organizations of the 1760s, it had a defined membership, initially of twenty-one members. The composition of the committee, notably, though it did include a number of merchants, resembled not so much the 1770 Committee of Inspection, which had represented the merchant community, but rather the politician-heavy Sons committees of 1765-1766. Among the names were Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, Benjamin Church, James Otis and Thomas Young. William Cooper served as secretary.119

All of these official qualities were reflected in its first piece of correspondence, the circular letter. It presented itself as coming from “We the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of Boston in Town Meeting duly Assembled, according to Law”—that is, from a collective, corporate body with a fixed legal existence. It offered a formal restatement of the dispute with Hutchinson and two annexes, a statement of the “Rights of the colonists and of this province in particular” and “A List of the Infringements, and Violations of those Rights,” which formally and impersonally stated the colony’s case.120 The circular, like the official productions of other

118 See A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records (Boston, Mass.: Rockwell and Churchill), 18:93.
119 See Ibid. and Brown, Revolutionary Politics, 57-60.
120 Boston Town Records, 18:95-107. For a thorough discussion of the ideological content of these statements, see Brown, Revolutionary Politics, 68-78.
formally-constituted organizations, was signed not by individual gentlemen but by the group’s secretary, Cooper, “In the Name and by Order of the Town.” Indeed, even the fact that it was printed helped to bring it fully into the realm of official productions, giving it optical consistency with the other printed productions of the Boston town meeting.

Like the merchants’ committees and the nascent network of individual Massachusetts patriots, the Boston Committee proposed using correspondence to exchange ideas and coordinate tactics. Indeed, in its first letter, the BCC expressed a desire for an exchange of views. It asked that the letter and its annexes be “laid before your Town, that the subject may be weighed as its importance requires, and the collected wisdom of the whole People, as far as possible, be obtained.” Echoing Adams’s words to Gerry, the Committee said that “a free communication of your sentiments to this Town…is earnestly solicited and will be gratefully received.”

Richard Brown has shown, moreover, that this request was not pro forma—or at least, it was not taken as such by the towns. Though their response to the initial circular was slow, the Massachusetts towns took the opportunity to express themselves fully and freely. In many cases, they disagreed with Boston on the significance of particular rights or violations of them; in other cases, on the

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121 *Boston, November 20, 1772. Gentlemen, We, the freeholders and other inhabitants of Boston...* (Boston, 1772) [Evans 42317; this copy is addressed as a form to the Selectmen of Concord]

122 A printed pamphlet version of the entire package, including the annexes and some additional materials, is presented as a collection of “The Votes and Proceedings of the Freedholders and other Inhabitants of the Town of Boston…,” emphasizing its official character. See *The Votes and Proceedings...* (Boston, 1772) [Evans 12332]. For the notion of “optical consistency,” see Latour, “Drawing Things Together.”

proper response to those violations. It was, in short, a colony-wide discussion about the dangers to British American liberty and the best strategies to oppose it.  

The incipient public network intertwined from the start with the networks of patriot gentlemen across Massachusetts. Adams used his connections to individual patriot leaders across the colonies to try to prepare the ground for the arrival of the BCC letter. He asked both James Warren and Elbridge Gerry to convene town meetings in order to receive and deliberate on the resolves. And he sent the resolves accompanied by personal letters: his November 27th letter to James Warren enclosed a “printed Copy, as far as it is workd off, of the Proceedings of this Town. The Selectmen of Plymouth will have it sent to them as soon as the Printers can finish it.” Adams was evidently in such a hurry to share the contents of the circular with Warren that he did not even wait for it to be completely printed. As we will see in the next chapter, the parallel private correspondences also provided opportunities for the patriots to quietly urge a particular course of public action by town committees. A new kind of American political network was being born.

**Conclusion**

The years from 1770 to early 1773 saw the American patriot movement’s fortunes undergo a striking reversal. In mid-1770, faced with the slow collapse of the non-importation agreements and the aftermath of the Boston Massacre, even patriot leaders themselves wondered whether the movement would survive. Yet little more than two years later, Boston patriots had

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124 See Brown, *Revolutionary Politics*, Chs. 5 and 6, esp. 108-114.


thoroughly revived their political fortunes on the local level and were on their way to reigniting a powerful popular opposition to Britain in the other colonies. The patriots managed to resurrect their movement so quickly in good measure because of their distinctive private and public epistolarity. Boston patriot leaders deployed their commercial-style correspondence at the inter-colonial and trans-Atlantic levels to shape the flow of information about the patriot movement, effectively promoting their view of the imperial crisis. On the local level, they built on habits of familiar correspondence to develop the first formal patriot network, enabling them to achieve a new level of tactical coordination within Massachusetts. That they were able to revive the patriot movement even in the absence of any new pressures from the government in Whitehall—which had of course been the main force driving American resistance in the 1760s—is a testament to the effectiveness of the methods that they employed.

Yet the Boston patriots did not succeed only because of their epistolary habits, but also in some measure in spite of them. The debate in the Massachusetts House over whether to publish the Hutchinson-Oliver letters shows that the patriots (indeed all letter writers, past and present) did not exercise full control over their own letter writing. Shared epistolary habits and commonly accepted rules governing epistolary genres placed limits on both the kinds of letters that the Boston patriots could write and the kinds of politics that were possible through them. As such, the Boston patriots’ management of epistolary testimony around the Atlantic in the early 1770s must be seen as an effort to adapt a pre-existing form to new needs. And the process of retrofitting an epistolary model designed for one purpose to serve another did not necessarily go smoothly. The Sons’ initial attempt to shape the news of the Boston Massacre did not succeed in part because they did not yet have a mechanism for communicating secretly with allies across the
Atlantic. Their desire to expose Hutchinson’s letters to public view, similarly, nearly snagged on their own epistolary conventions.

As the Boston Sons were struggling to adapt a commercial correspondence model to the new political needs of the patriot movement in the early 1770s, however, they also created a new kind of epistolary network on the local level. Growing out of familiar correspondences among individuals who knew one another face-to-face, it permitted a level of discussion and coordination that the Sons had not been able to achieve before among the colonies. Initially, the Boston Sons used the network to plan their resistance to Governor Hutchinson—a purely local aim. This type of network was in any case not easily extendable to the other colonies, since it depended on pre-existing friendships. By formalizing these relationship through the BCC in 1772, however, the Sons created the possibility for a new kind of inter-colonial network. If Sons in other colonies organized similar formal groups, they could enter into correspondence with one another and create for the first time an inter-colonial Sons of Liberty network capable of coordinated resistance to British policies.
CH. 3: MECHANICS OF PROTEST:

COMMITTEES AND PRIVATE CORRESPONDENTS, 1773-1775

In the two years from the beginning of 1773 to the last days of 1775, the American patriot movement developed a formal inter-colonial system of communication. Though this transformation lay the groundwork for the creation of a national government in the following years, the process by which it occurred owed much to private epistolarity. This chapter traces the contribution of private correspondence to the construction of the first permanent formal patriot network. It shows, first, that the creation of committees of correspondence across the colonies in mid-1773 was underpinned by patriots’ private epistolary links. Moreover, the new “official” networks did not displace the older ones: personal networks persisted alongside the formal ones, providing an alternate channel for sensitive information and a means by which patriot leaders could interpret information for one another out of the public eye.

The arrival of news of the Coercive Acts in the spring of 1774 spurred patriot leaders to move beyond moral unity and to begin engaging in dialogue and debate across the colonies. Indeed, the Acts furnished patriots with the means to break out of the confines of mercantile epistolarity and engage in a back and forth about the strategy and tactics of resistance. The meeting of the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in the fall of 1774 continued and accelerated this transformation. In the wake of their face to face meeting, patriot leaders’ inter-colonial networks became fully dialogic for the first time, mirroring the kind of in-depth discussion that had been taking place on the local level for several years. Yet the shape of the
network and the material culture of letter writing, long settled in the mold of mercantile epistolarity, persisted—forging a new, hybrid epistolary model.

In addition to being a story about the formalization of inter-colonial organizing and its growing power as an instrument of ideological and tactical unity, this chapter also pursues two larger themes raised in the previous chapters. First, the deep and complex interconnections between formal public organizing and unofficial epistolary links among leading patriots. We have already seen that public and private networks interacted. This chapter shows that patriots cannily used these doubled epistolary networks to create the impression of a spontaneous inter-colonial movement against British government measures. At the same time, public networks displayed many of the characteristics of the private epistolary links that helped to create them. Even in the Continental Congress, the initial pattern of political alliance-formation closely followed the lines of inter-colonial connection that had been forged through private correspondence over the previous decade.

A second theme is the role of emotion in political letter-writing. In recent years, a number of scholars working on Europe and America during the eighteenth century have undertaken historical studies of emotion. In the American case, most of this work has focused on rhetoric in the print sphere. In this chapter, I show that expressions of emotion acted as a literary technology that patriots used in their private letters to break the boundaries of mercantile epistolarity in 1774. Emotion was instrumental in allowing the inter-colonial patriot movement to begin the transformation of its internal dynamics in the months leading up to the Continental Congress. After the Congress, expressions of feeling served as a cement for the patriot leadership’s increasingly deep ideological and tactical engagement with one another. These
findings extend the history of emotion for the first time into our understanding of the day to day functioning of patriot politics in the coming of the American Revolution.

Creating the Committee of Correspondence system, 1773

Patriots had talked for years about creating a more formal system of inter-colonial correspondence. The impetus to do it in 1773 came from Boston, where as we have seen patriots were engaged in an increasingly tense standoff with Thomas Hutchinson. Recent events in Rhode Island had further inflamed feelings on both sides in the Bay Colony. In June, 1772, a crowd of merchants and maritime people had destroyed a British customs schooner, the *Gaspée*, in Narragansett Bay. This act seemed likely to be met with repression from the outraged imperial government. Massachusetts patriots, fearful that they would again find themselves singled out as the hotbed of colonial sedition, decided to reach out to the other colonies to offer their account of events and gain their concurrence in opposing any British measures.

The Boston Committee decided to initiate contact with the other colonies by approaching Virginia. Virginia was the natural starting point for building an inter-colonial network: as the largest, oldest and wealthiest of the colonies, its neighbors looked to it to exercise political leadership. Yet instead of sending a circular letter to the Virginia House of Burgesses, as they had done several times before, the Boston patriots approached the House via private channels.

1 In addition to the debate over Hutchinson’s letters, discussed in the previous chapter, there was a parallel dispute between Hutchinson and the Massachusetts General Court about the authority of Parliament. On this, see especially Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 201-220.


3 See above, Chs. 1 and 2.
Though the Bostonians were not explicit about their motivations for choosing this strategy, Virginia’s reputation is the most likely explanation: if the Boston Committee’s public overtures were rejected by the Virginians, it would undermine the patriots’ contention that resistance to Britain was the “common cause” of the colonies.

In early 1773, the Boston Committee sent two messages down to Virginia by private channels. In January, Thomas Cushing wrote to Richard Henry Lee, enclosing a pamphlet about the disputes between Hutchinson and the Massachusetts House. His letter has been lost, but judging by the response it elicited, it was a relatively straightforward political missive. In February, before Cushing had received a reply to his letter, William Palfrey, who was not an official member of the Committee, contacted Benjamin Harrison, his longtime Virginia business partner, to the same effect. He wrote him a standard commercial letter, which he sent via a man named Captain Kent. Near the end of the letter, he slipped in a short mention of the crisis:

I have also deliver’d Capt Kent the papers which contain the dispute of the House of Assembly & Councils with the Governor on the subject of the supreme authority of the British Parla over the colonies. A subject highly interesting to the whole continent & may afford you some entertainment at a leisure hour.

Palfrey’s coyness in this letter—he suggests that these papers might “afford” Harrison “some entertainment at a leisure hour”—is understandable. In his long commercial correspondence with Harrison up to that point, the two men had never exchanged a word about politics. Palfrey may well have gleaned from third parties, like ship captains or traveling Virginia businessmen,

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4 See Richard Henry Lee to [Thomas Cushing], 13 Feb 73, Miscellaneous Bound Documents, 1770-1773, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

5 Palfrey (Boston) to Benjamin Harrison, 10 Feb 1773, Palfrey Family Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
that Harrison was sympathetic to the patriot cause. Yet he could not be sure. And to open political subjects, alien from the purely “private” concerns of their correspondence to that point, was a risky move. If Harrison did not in fact sympathize, or if he was not interested in taking part in the patriot cause, the result might be damaging to their commercial relationship.

Fortunately for Palfrey, Harrison was not only sympathetic to Boston’s cause but willing to help. He and Lee brought the Massachusetts papers to the Virginia Assembly, which met on March 4th, and “lay them before the assembly.” The resulting resolves, passed unanimously by the Virginia House, called for the formation of a committee of correspondence. As the Massachusetts patriots had been doing for several years, the Virginia patriots defined the problem that they were confronting as one of knowledge or information, rather than ideology. Having heard “various rumors and reports of proceedings tending to deprive them of their ancient, legal and constitutional right,” they charged the Committee with “obtain[ing] the most early and authentic intelligence,” “inform[ing] themselves” about the Rhode Island court of inquiry, and “keep[ing] up and maintain[ing] a correspondence and communication with our sister colonies.” Both Harrison and Lee were appointed members of the committee.

As soon as the Virginia Assembly session ended, Harrison and Lee both wrote to their correspondents in Massachusetts to pass on the news. Lee’s letter, sent on or after March 19th, enclosed a manuscript copy of the Assembly’s resolves, along with an official letter from Peyton Randolph, chair of the new Virginia Committee, to Thomas Cushing. Lee’s letter suggested that he hoped the communication between them would give rise to an official communication with

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6 Richard Henry Lee to [Thomas Cushing], 13 Feb 73, Miscellaneous Bound Documents, 1770-1773, MHS

the Massachusetts “assembly & every assembly in British America.” The official letter underscored this sentiment and reveals the degree to which the exchanges thus far had been private communications, rather than official contacts. Randolph made clear that he was writing to Cushing in his official capacity, as Speaker of the Massachusetts House, by asking him to “lay them [the resolves] before your assembly as early as possible” and get them to “appoint some of their body to communicate…with the corresponding committee of Virginia.”8

Harrison’s letter, though it did not enclose any official correspondence, went off several days earlier than Lee’s, around March 14th. “I recd the papers you sent me,” he wrote to Palfrey, and “our assembly seting a few days after, they were of some use to us.” He enclosed a copy of the resolves and assured Palfrey that “we are endeavouring to bring our sister colonies into the strictest union with us.” He, too, urged Palfrey to establish official communications. Make sure, he urged, that “the different committees” supply Virginia with “the earliest intelligence of any motion that may be made by the tyrants in England to carry their infernal purposes of enslaving us into execution.”9 Palfrey received Harrison’s letter in early April and considered it of such importance that he “immediately communicated [it] to our committee of correspondence.” The Committee “tho’t them [the resolves] of so great importance to the common cause,” he reported back, “that they sent a printed extract of the letter & copy of the resolves to all the corresponding towns & provinces.”10

The resulting broadside (see Figure A) reveals much about the complex interaction of public and private epistololarity and credibility in the patriot movement. At the top, the

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8 Richard Lee to Thomas Cushing, 17 Mar 1773 and Peyton Randolph to [Thomas Cushing], 19 Mar 1773, both in Misc Bound Docs, 1770-1773, MHS.

9 Harrison to Palfrey, 14 Mar 1773, Palfrey Family Papers.

10 Palfrey (Boston) to Harrison, 11 Apr 1773, Palfrey Family Papers. Emphasis mine.
Committee put a letter, dated April 9th, communicating the resolves and bearing the signature of William Cooper “by Direction of the Committee for Correspondence in Boston.” Typical of corporate letter-writing, this established the missive as an official and faithful copy. Below it was a paragraph-long extract from Harrison’s letter and a copy of the Virginia resolves that he had enclosed. The extract of Harrison’s letter served a dual purpose. First, it authenticated the resolves by establishing their provenance—a task also aided by a comment on Harrison himself, whom the Committee called “a gentleman of distinction in Virginia.” (As was typical of reprinted private letters, they omitted his name, the salutation and the valediction of the letter.) Second, the reprinted letter provided valuable additional information: it confirmed the fact that at least some Virginians were privately committed to the cause. Indeed, the printers quietly emphasized the Virginians’ commitment by setting certain words in Harrison’s missive, including “resent in one body” and “tyrants,” in capital letters.11

The text of the broadside also strongly suggests another reason why the Boston patriots had initially used private channels: in a bid to frame the Virginia resolves as a spontaneous and independent response to the horrors of administration policy. The text of the broadside quietly elided the fact that the Boston patriots had solicited the Virginians to take part in the movement. The only hint in the broadside of how the Virginians had come to be involved in what was after all a local, Massachusetts dispute was the first line of the extract from Harrison’s letter, which indicated that he had received “papers” from a Boston correspondent. Without knowing about the private correspondence that had led up to it, a reader of the broadside was likely to conclude that the Virginians had spontaneously decided to join in the opposition to British measures.

11 “Boston, April 9, 1773. The Committee of Correspondence of this Town have received…” [Evans no. 12689].
The Boston patriot leaders broadcast this partial narrative of events to their supporters across the colonies and in England. In his otherwise detailed report to Arthur Lee on the Virginia resolves, for instance, Samuel Adams dexterously neglected to mention the role that private letters had played:

This [the controversy with Hutchinson], together with ye proceedings of a contemptible Town meeting, has awakned the Jealousy of all, & has particularly raised ye Spirit of the most ancient & patriotick Colony of Virginia. Their manly Resolves have been transmitted to the Speaker of the House of Representatives in a printed Sheet of their Journals; and our Com" of Correspondence have circulated Copies of them into every Town & District through the Province.¹²

Of course, as we know, it was Harrison’s letter and the manuscript copy of the resolves—not the official one sent by Richard Henry Lee—that had been printed in the circular. Samuel Cooper, explaining events to Benjamin Franklin, bent the truth even further. “Virginia has led the way,” he declared, “by proposing a Communication and Correspondence between all the Commons Houses thro the Continent.”¹³ Of course, Virginia had only “led the way” after considerable prompting from their Boston brethren.

Within a few weeks, the committee system had begun to extend across the colonies. This was what Samuel Adams had hoped would happen: Virginia’s action, he wrote, would receive “the hearty Concurence of every Assembly on the Continent” and the resulting network would

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¹³ Cooper to BF, 14 Jun 1773, Benjamin Franklin et al., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959-), 20:232.
ensure that the colonies were “early acquainted with the particular Circumstances of Each.”

The Rhode Island assembly went first, agreeing in May to organize a similar committee. The assemblies in New Hampshire, Connecticut and South Carolina set up committees of correspondence later that month and next. Only the middle colonies, particularly Pennsylvania and New York, did not immediately take up the proposed committee plan.

Yet even though the creation of the new network was on the face of it an impressive step—it was the first official system of correspondence among the colonial assemblies—its practical effect was initially very limited. Like the private inter-colonial correspondence out of which it had grown, the Virginia Committee’s correspondence was supposed to be purely informational. The assembly ordered it to gather “a full Account of the Principles and Authority, on which was constituted [the] Court of Enquiry” into the Gaspée affair and to “procure a Copy of an Act of Parliament…intituled ‘An Act for the better preserving his Majesty’s Dock-Yards, Magazines, Ships, Ammunition and Stores.’” Indeed, the House took the opportunity of these inter-colonial contacts about British encroachments on American liberties to forward copies of a


16 Richard Henry Lee did try to incite John Dickinson in Pennsylvania to form a Committee, but this appeal seems to have fallen on deaf ears: see RH Lee to Dickinson, 4 Apr 1773, James Curtis Ballagh, ed. *The Letters of Richard Henry Lee* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 1:83-84.

recent Virginia law prohibiting currency forgery to all of the colonies. The inclusion of this enclosure, entirely unrelated to the main question at hand, suggests that the House regarded these contacts at least in part as a mere mail service to be used for multiple purposes.\(^\text{18}\)

The responses from almost every colony announcing the formation of Committees emphasized their informational purpose. The Rhode Island House echoed the Virginia House’s language, establishing a committee charged with gathering “the most early and Authentick Intelligence” of British government acts, and little else.\(^\text{19}\) The New Hampshire and Massachusetts Houses, which responded next, imagined a slightly more active role for the Committees: they would work (as Massachusetts put it) to develop “some effectual Measures for restoring the publick Liberty.” Yet even these more radical colonies described their Committees as devoted primarily to the “Purpose of Communication.”\(^\text{20}\) The Connecticut House, likewise, described its Committee as a body “to and by whom matters relative to the general Interest of the Colonies may be communicated.”\(^\text{21}\) Their practice reflected their mission statements. At the end of June, 1773, for instance, the Massachusetts Committee received a letter from Connecticut asking for copies of the recently published Hutchinson-Oliver letters; they sent them off quickly,

\(^{18}\text{See Virginia Committee to Various, 6 Apr 1773, in Ibid., 2:22.}\)

\(^{19}\text{Metcalf Bowler to Peyton Randolph, 15 May 1773, in Ibid., 2:27. See also the nearly identical wording in the proceedings of the Delaware, Georgia, Maryland and North Carolina Houses, Van Schreeven and Scribner, eds., Revolutionary Virginia, 2:50, 53, 56 and 58.}\)

\(^{20}\text{Thomas Cushing to Peyton Randolph, 3 Jun 1773, in Van Schreeven and Scribner, eds., Revolutionary Virginia, 2:31 and John Wentworth to Peyton Randolph, 27 May 1773, in Ibid., 2:29.}\)

\(^{21}\text{Ebenezer Silliman to Peyton Randolph, 24 Jun 1773, in Ibid., 2:35. An August letter from the Connecticut Committee to its Virginia counterpart was precisely in this informational vein: the Connecticut patriots asked the Virginians for information about how the Virginia courts were responding to writs of assistance: see Connecticut Committee to Virginia Committee, 10 Aug 1773, in Ibid., 2:41.}\)
along with “printed copies of the Controversy between the Governor and the Two Houses of the Last Assembly.”\[^{22}\] During July and August, the Massachusetts Committee repeatedly delayed sending out letters to the other colonies since they “Dayly Expected” to receive “fresh Intelligence…from Great Britain.”\[^{23}\] The committees made the transmission of news, not coordination, their priority.

In sum, the exchanges among the new committees of correspondence offered few possibilities for inter-colonial communication beyond what the private correspondences among patriot leaders had enabled.\[^{24}\] Indeed, this is not surprising in light of the fact that the “public” correspondences very often owed their existence to contacts made through private relationships. Those private correspondences, moreover, often continued to run in parallel alongside the new public correspondences. The existence of public committees created by legal bodies did allow the patriot leadership to more effectively claim the popular mantle. But for practical purposes—for the crucial matter of developing a working system of inter-colonial union and coordination—the committees of correspondence contributed little.

**Breaking the mercantile mold: committees and private correspondents, 1773-1774**

In the year from mid-1773 to mid-1774, the patriot movement took major steps toward deepening the epistolary connections among the colonies. The changes took place in two phases,

\[^{22}\] Journal of the Committee of Correspondence of Massachusetts, 28 Jun 1773, in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1879-), 2d ser., vol. 4, 86.

\[^{23}\] Ibid., 2d ser., vol. 4, 87.

\[^{24}\] Jack Rakove observed that the Committees of Correspondence, “so enthusiastically formed during the previous months, remained empty vessels, neither directing nor coordinating resistance.” See Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 13.
corresponding to the major crises of this period sparked by the Tea Act and the Coercive Acts. During the resistance to the Tea Act, the patriot leadership expanded the formal correspondences among the colonies while maintaining its strictly localist approach to tactics. The problems that this caused, in turn, spurred the Sons to reorganize their epistolary bonds, in particular by expanding the number of private correspondences among patriot leaders in different colonies. Yet they continued to conform to the purely informational model of correspondence that they had employed since 1765. It was the news of the Coercive Acts that enabled the Sons to finally escape from the confining conventions of mercantile epistolarity. Using powerfully stated expressions of emotion, they broke through the polite veneer of mercantile-style letters and began to engage in tactical coordination across the colonies.

By the spring of 1773, when the first rumors of the Tea Act arrived, patriot leaders had become increasingly aware of the need for inter-colonial coordination. In late 1772, Thomas Young, a leading Boston Son, blamed the failure of the nonimportation movement on a lack of coordination among the colonies.25 Writing to John Dickinson in late March, Samuel Adams apologized for the Massachusetts House’s recent publication of a lengthy statement arguing that the colonies were not subject to Parliamentary power.26 Adams recognized that “the Sense of the Colonies might possibly be drawn from what might be advanced by this Province.” The Massachusetts “Assembly would rather have chosen to have been silent till the Sentiments of at least Gentlemen of Eminence out of this province could be known,” but Hutchinson had given

25 Thomas Young to Unknown [New York], 21 Dec 1772, Misc Bound Docs 1770-1773, MHS. See the paragraph beginning “The reflections cast upon us for our infidelity in the non importation agreement, were very injurious.”

26 For the statement, see Massachusetts House of Representatives to Governor Thomas Hutchinson, 2 Mar 1773, reprinted in Adams, Writings of Samuel Adams, 2:431-454.
them no choice but to speak up.\textsuperscript{27} And Arthur Lee, as he had been doing for several years already, pressed the case for deeper inter-colonial coordination. In June, he urged Adams to make sure that “the leading men in each assembly [were] communicating with one another” privately.\textsuperscript{28}

Patriot leaders realized early that the Tea Act created a special need for coordinated measures of resistance among the colonies. The Act revised the sole element of the Townshend Acts of 1767 that had remained in force after their repeal in 1770, the duty on imported tea. The new Act lowered the duties substantially, made the tax payable in Britain rather than the colonies, and gave the East India Company the right to ship its tea directly to America.\textsuperscript{29} As such, it posed a special threat: because tea was fungible, if chests of the stuff were landed at any port, it would quickly find its way via coasting vessels and overland transportation to every part of the colonies—and at lower prices than other tea.\textsuperscript{30} “The landing any part” of the tea, a Pennsylvania broadside declared, “would be attended with great danger and difficulty” for the

\textsuperscript{27} SA to Dickinson, 27 Mar 1773, Ibid., 3:13.

\textsuperscript{28} Arthur Lee to SA, 11 Jun 1773, Richard Henry Lee, \textit{Life of Arthur Lee, LL.D., joint commissioner of the United States to the court of France, and sole commissioner to the courts of Spain and Prussia, during the Revolutionary War; with his political and literary correspondence and his papers on diplomatic and political subjects, and the affairs of the United States during the same period} (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1829), 1:229.


patriot movement across the colonies.\textsuperscript{31} Or as a New York newspaper proclaimed in January, 1774, if the New Yorkers allowed the tea to be landed, they would “defeat the ends of their spirited and unanimous opposition” and become the “gate through which slavery forced its way into America.”\textsuperscript{32} Moral union alone, in other words, was not sufficient to mount a successful campaign against the Tea Act; there had to be inter-colonial coordination if resistance was to be successful.

Patriot leaders also felt pressure from below to improve coordination among the colonies. As they had in the 1760s, a broad cross-section of the population of cities and towns across the colonies sought to take part in the resistance to the Tea Act. Mass meetings and newspaper articles began to call for a consumer boycott of the dutied article. While the Sons’ leaders were happy to have the enthusiastic support of the populace, and did everything in their power to keep it, the spread of the boycott movement made the need for coordination among the colonies more acute. Non-consumption, as a tactic of resistance, would only be truly effective if it were universal or nearly so. Moreover, a partial consumer boycott, like partial non-importation, could actually damage both colonial unity and the economy of resisting colonies, by driving commerce in tea towards places that were not participating in the boycott.\textsuperscript{33}

In spite of their growing recognition of the need for inter-colonial coordination, patriot leaders remained unable to put that principle into practice in their correspondence. In October, 1773, a special Committee of Correspondence established by the Massachusetts House wrote a

\textsuperscript{31} “The unanimity, spirit and zeal, which have heretofore animated all the colonies,” 27 Dec 1773 [Evans 12945].

\textsuperscript{32} “To the Inhabitants of New York,” Pennsylvania Packet, 3 Jan 1774.

circular to the other provincial Committees. (Samuel Adams was one of the two members who
drafted the letter.) Even as it called for increased inter-colonial cooperation, the letter carefully
sidestepped any effort to impose a consistent point of view or plan of action on the individual
colonial patriot movements. Indeed, the letter seems to be at war with itself, both wishing for
union and refusing to adopt the measures necessary to create it. The writers first noted that it
was “of the utmost Importance that…the Colonies should be united in their Sentiments of the
Measures of Opposition necessary to be taken by them” and urged that when “any Infringements
are or shall be made on the common Rights of all, that Colony should have the united Efforts of
all for its Support.” Yet in the next paragraph, describing the actions to be taken, they drew back
strongly from the idea of a unified, coordinated response. “With Regard to the Extent of
Rights which the Colonies ought to insist upon, it is a Subject which requires the closest
Attention & Deliberation … [by] every Committee.” That is, they explicitly placed the burden
for doing this thinking on each individual Committee. In closing, they added that “Each Colony
should take effectual methods” to prevent the enforcement of the Tea Act. They expected local
Committees not only to deliberate independently but also to take action autonomously.34

The Boston Committee confirmed this approach to inter-colonial resistance with a series
of letters in early December to individuals in New York, Philadelphia and several other colonies.
The letters to the New York and Philadelphia Sons asked simply that they keep the Boston
Committee abreast of the latest news. The Boston patriots wanted to be “duly [advised] of all
matters relative to our common interest and security which may come to your knowledge
especially what may occur in your province and city.” Like the October letter, they restated their

34 Committee of Correspondence of the Massachusetts House to Various, 21 Oct 1773, in Van
Schreeven and Scribner, eds., Revolutionary Virginia, 2:45-46. This letter is also reprinted in
belief in the importance of “harmony of sentiment and concurrence in action uniformly and firmly maintained.” But as they had in the earlier letter as well, they refrained from advocating any specific line of action to the Sons in the middle colonies.\textsuperscript{35} Writing to the New England Sons, they urged the formation of committees of correspondence in every town and blandly expressed the hope that “by a firm union we may finally be enabled to defeat the repeated endeavors of our enemies to subvert the rights and liberties of Americans.”\textsuperscript{36}

The one exception to the rule shows just how difficult it was for the Sons to engage in tactical coordination among colonies. In December, Charles Thomson, one of the leading patriots in Philadelphia, wrote a first letter to Samuel Adams.\textsuperscript{37} Thomson’s letter is the first surviving piece of correspondence in which a Son of Liberty in one colony attempts to offer advice to the Sons of another colony. Thomson devoted the majority of his letter to reaffirming their shared beliefs, especially his “pain” at the conflict and his desire for union with Britain in accord with “constitutional liberty.” Towards the end, however, the missive took an unusual turn. Frustrated by the British government’s continuing encroachments, he proposed a radical program of military training and preparations to be ready for the coming “crisis.” His aim, he explained at the end of his letter, was “to stimulate [the colonies] to act in concert … For though

\textsuperscript{35} BCC to New York and Philadelphia, 6 Dec 1773, Minute Book, Boston Committee of Correspondence Papers, New York Public Library, New York, 470-471.

\textsuperscript{36} BCC to various (New Hampshire and Rhode Island), 5 Dec 1773, Minute Book, BCC Papers, NYPL, 471-472.

\textsuperscript{37} First letters were a particular genre of letter designed to open correspondences. They were usually relatively short and almost always began with an apology for writing and an explanation of how the writer had come to be in contact with the recipient (usually through a mutual friend).
I should be sorry to see matters precipitated, yet I would wish all the colonies would appear united and alike animated.”38

Yet even as he sought to increase coordination among the colonies, Thomson suggested how high the barriers remained. He framed his recommendations to the Boston Sons in almost painfully diffident language. “A correspondence might be opened,” he wrote, “and kept up between the politicians and principal men in the several governments.” “Were I to proceed,” he continued with seeming tentativeness, “I would recommend the keeping up a martial spirit in the people….” He concluded with a self-effacing characterization of these well developed ideas as just some “random thoughts on the plan of American opposition.” What’s more, Thomson closed his letter by asserting a significant difference in social status between himself and the recipients, Adams and John Hancock. “As my rank in life will not add any force to my sentiments,” he explained, “I should chuse to remain unknown to all but a select few.”39 As we have seen, the Sons’ inter-colonial correspondence employed the model of mercantile correspondence among equals. By presenting himself as a social inferior, Thomson effectively placed himself outside of this epistolary universe, thus giving him license to transgress the boundaries of epistolary politeness.

In the absence of effective means for inter-colonial coordination via correspondence, patriot leaders turned to other methods to build some of the tactical union they thought they needed. One of the most important was sending leading patriots to pay personal visits to their counterparts in other colonies. Boston and Philadelphia had already exchanged visits earlier in

38 Charles Thomson to Samuel Adams and John Hancock, 19 Dec 1773, BCC Papers, NYPL.
39 Charles Thomson to Samuel Adams and John Hancock, 19 Dec 1773, Ibid.
1773, and in November they sent William Palfrey down to Philadelphia and New York to solidify the union among these key port cities. Face-to-face contact with his counterparts gave Palfrey the right to offer advice. He urged the New Yorkers to “fix a Committee of Correspondence” so that “a line of communication would be kept up, which might add great weight [to] the common cause.” He also emphasized the “importance…that we should pursue the same uniform mode of opposition;” New York had to concur in the “plan adopted by the other colonies.” Even with the benefit of direct engagement, however, Palfrey felt the need to apologize for his directness: “I would by no means pretend to dictate,” he added. “You will undoubtedly pursue measures best adapted to your local circumstances & most likely [to] answer the purposes we wish to accomplish.” Palfrey’s physical presence in Philadelphia and New York also gave him the credibility to affirm to the Boston Sons the reliability and firmness of the opposition to the Tea Act in these other ports—which he hoped Boston would match.

Merchants also helped to create a modicum of uniform resistance to the Tea Act across the colonies. Soon after news of the Act arrived, merchants in Philadelphia had resolved to refuse the tea. They were open about their desire for a unified colonial front against the Tea Act:

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41 Palfrey wrote that “I beg leave to assure them that my whole time of absence shall be devoted to their service in the common cause.” Palfrey (Philadelphia) to Unknown (Boston), Saturday [blank] Dec 1773, Palfrey Family Papers, Houghton Library.

42 Palfrey (Phila) to Saml Broome, 16 Dec 1773, both in Ibid.

43 “The people of Philadelphia are to a man united in the common cause;” Palfrey (Philadelphia) to Unknown (Boston), Saturday [blank] Dec 1773, Ibid. See also William Palfrey to Susannah Palfrey, 28 Dec 1773, Ibid.
one Philadelphia merchant wrote, worried, that he had heard that Boston merchants had
“imported tea without any reserve and paid the duties.” Yet this rumor only spurred him to urge
more strongly the need not to import. “You may depend not an ounce has paid duties in this
port,” he wrote, apparently trying to spur emulation. “But whatever may have been done, it is to
be hoped the town of Boston will appear on the present occasion with their usual spirit.”44 By
the middle of October, the Philadelphia merchants’ decision seems to have reduced the potential
market for the East India tea in other colonies as well. “Send no Tea, it cannot be received here,”
wrote one Philadelphia merchant to his Boston correspondent. Indeed, he went on, “Tis best not
to be concern’d even in that Tea which never did pay duty.”45 The Essex Gazette reported
around the same time that at least one Philadelphia merchant had “countermand[ed]” his recent
orders for tea from Boston.46

For the most part, however, tactical coordination took place only on the scale of
individual colonies. In Massachusetts, for instance, the Tea Act provided the occasion for
another burst of intense consultation and discussion among the towns.47 Shortly after news of
the Tea Act arrived, Samuel Adams wrote a friendly letter to Joseph Hawley, an important
landowner and political leader in western Hampshire County. He began by asking Hawley’s
advice: “I can not omit this Opportunity of submitting to your Judgment, the Ideas I have of the

44 Massachusetts Spy, 11 Nov 1773.
46 Essex Gazette, 19 Oct 1773.
47 For the BCC’s role in coaxing the towns into political activity and their relatively autonomous
political and ideological thinking, see Richard Brown, Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The
Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), Ch. 5.
present Disposition of the British Administration towards this Country,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{48} The Boston
Committee and the towns maintained a similar back and forth in their correspondence. In the
first week in December, for instance, the Committee wrote to Isaac Foster, a leading
Charlestown Son, to let him know that “agreeable to your request” they had appointed “a
Committee to wait upon the Dealers in Tea to know their Resolutions with respect to the Sale of
Teas in this Town.”\textsuperscript{49} Similar coordination took place in New York, Pennsylvania and
Charleston as patriots organized public meetings to develop a unified local response to the Act.\textsuperscript{50}

As a result of these intensive, face-to-face local discussions, the various actions taken by
patriots in each colony produced strong local assent. The most vivid illustration of this success
came in Massachusetts. In December, under imminent threat of government action to distribute
the East India Company tea that the patriot movement had prevented from being landed, a group
of Boston Sons disguised themselves as Indians, boarded the tea ships and methodically heaved
the tea into the harbor.\textsuperscript{51} Though the other Massachusetts towns were surprised by the Boston
patriots’ actions, within a few weeks almost all of them had endorsed it. In most cases, they
expressed their support for Boston by actually taking action, most often by adopting non-

\textsuperscript{48} SA to Hawley, 4 Oct 1773, Adams, \textit{Writings of Samuel Adams}, 3:52. On Hawley, see Francis

\textsuperscript{49} BCC to Captain Isaac Foster, 3 Dec 1773, Minute Book, 476, BCC Papers, NYPL.

\textsuperscript{50} See Richard Alan Ryerson, \textit{“The Revolution is now begun”: The Radical Committees of
Joseph S. Tiedemann, \textit{Reluctant Revolutionaries: New York City and the Road to Independence,
1763-1776} (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 176-178. For Charleston, see Richard

\textsuperscript{51} For a description of the tea party and the reasons for it, see Carp, \textit{Defiance of the Patriots}, Ch.
6. This account supersedes that in Benjamin W. Labaree, \textit{The Boston Tea Party} (New York:
Oxford University Press, 1964), Ch. 7.
consumption rules prohibiting the purchase and drinking of tea. On the other side, only two towns directly rebuked Boston for the tea party.

Outside Massachusetts, the lack of coordination left patriot leaders in a tight spot, forced to defend Boston’s extremely radical action. Though the Bostonians claimed with some justification that they had had no choice but to destroy the East India Company tea, at risk of allowing it to be seized and sold by the government, their actions still marked a significant escalation of the conflict. As Arthur Lee observed in January, 1774, the destruction of the tea had left Boston “singled out as the place where the most violence has been offered.” Though few patriots were willing to openly question the Boston Sons’ decision, neither did they rush to approve of its actions or associate themselves with it. Benjamin Franklin, the colony’s own agent, urged the General Court to “repair the Damage and make Compensation to the Company.” The Philadelphia Committee of Correspondence responded so dryly to the account

52 On the response to the Tea Party in the towns, see Carp, Defiance of the Patriots, 166-167. For town resolves adopting bans on tea consumption, see incoming correspondence in Minute Book, esp. that entered on 4 Jan 1773. For a particularly strong statement of support for the Boston Tea Party, see Town of Newburyport to BCC, 21 Dec 1773, Minute Book, 495-496, BCC Papers, NYPL.

53 Brown, Revolutionary Politics, 167-171 and Carp, Defiance of the Patriots, 166-167.

54 American patriots of course had a long history of destroying private property, from Thomas Hutchinson’s home to goods imported in contravention of the commercial boycotts. But the scale of the destruction in Boston was far beyond anything they had done before. The tea was valued at nearly £10,000; John Hancock, one of the richest men in America, was worth only a few times that amount. See Carp, Defiance of the Patriots, 139-140 and William M. Fowler, The Baron of Beacon Hill: A Biography of John Hancock (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 49.


56 BF to Committee of Correspondence of the Massachusetts House, 2 Feb 1774, Franklin et al., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 21:76. See also BF to Thomas Cushing, 22 Mar 1773, Ibid., 21:153.
of the Tea Party as to seem to be condemning it. They were at pains to say, though, that they believe the Bostonians had been “compel[ed]” to do it by the “enemies of American liberty.”\textsuperscript{57}

The response from New York was similarly lukewarm, with no congratulatory letters dispatched to Boston and no emulation of Boston’s example.\textsuperscript{58}

In the new year, as the lesson of the divisions over the Tea Party sank in, patriots began to speak even more insistently than before about the need for union and coordination among the colonies. “The united efforts of all the colonies must in the end work out our political salvation,” wrote William Palfrey to a leading Philadelphia Son. “You are sensible of how importan[t] it is that such an union should be maintain’d.”\textsuperscript{59} Richard Henry Lee of Virginia suggested in April that parallel public and private correspondences could help ensure that this happened. “Should any material information concerning the American cause reach Boston from Parliament or Administration,” he wrote to Samuel Adams in late April, “I should be glad to have particular intelligence from you. At the same time, it will be highly conducive to the general good, that your Corresponding Committee write a public letter to ours on any such occasion.”\textsuperscript{60} These private channels, as we have already seen, offered patriot leaders a way to quietly shape the reception of information sent via more public channels.

\textsuperscript{57} Philadelphia Committee to BCC, 25 Dec 1773, Minute Book, 487-488, BCC Papers, NYPL.

\textsuperscript{58} For the response in New York, see Roger J. Champagne, “The Sons of Liberty and the Aristocracy in New York Politics, 1765-1790” (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1960), 303-304; Pauline Maier, \textit{From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776} (New York: Knopf, 1972), 277-278. This account differs from that of Labaree, \textit{The Boston Tea Party}, 152, but he cites no evidence to support his claim that “colonists everywhere were overjoyed” at the destruction of the tea.

\textsuperscript{59} William Palfrey to Thomas Mifflin, 13 Jan 1774, Palfrey Family Papers, Houghton Library.

\textsuperscript{60} Richard Henry Lee to Samuel Adams, 24 Apr 1774, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL.
By the spring of 1774, doubled correspondences like the one between Virginia and Massachusetts had spread throughout the patriot movement. Many of these links developed between members of the highly active Boston Committee and their counterparts in New York, Philadelphia, Connecticut and South Carolina. Though a number of private conduits between the Boston and New York Committees probably existed, we have evidence of only three: the correspondence between John Lamb and Thomas Young, William Palfrey and several allies, and Alexander McDougall and Samuel Adams.61 The significance of these private exchanges became most visible at the moment when the first news of the Coercive Acts arrived. On May 13, the Boston Committee dispatched a formal letter to the New York Committee describing the Acts and arguing that Parliament’s “grand object is to divide the colonies.” Near the end of the letter, they asked the New Yorkers to join a new trade boycott: “may we not from your approbation of our former conduct, in defense of American liberty, rely on your suspending your trade with Great Britain at least…?,” they asked tentatively.62 The same day, Thomas Young wrote at length to his “friend and brother” John Lamb, a leading New York Son. He offered a detailed explanation of the debate in Boston over “whether the trade to the West Indies had better be discontinued or not” and explained that they had proposed it in part as a measure to “keep the whole people as much on a level as may be” in spite of the temptation to profit from Boston’s distress.63


62 BCC to Cmtes of Phila, NY, NJ, RI, Conn and Portsmouth, 13 May 1774, BCC Papers, NYPL.

63 Thomas Young to John Lamb, 13 May 1774, John Lamb Papers, New-York Historical Society.
Similar double correspondences developed among patriots in Boston, Philadelphia and Connecticut. Silas Deane and several lesser-known figures maintained correspondences alongside the official exchanges between the Boston and Connecticut Committees while Charles Thomson and Thomas Mifflin exchanged letters with their Boston counterparts. The Connecticut letters also reveal that the Committee system, even at this late stage in the development of the inter-colonial resistance, remained a work in progress and still somewhat imperfectly differentiated from private correspondence. In June, the Boston Committee wrote to Silas Deane “as of the committee of correspondence for Weathersfield,” Connecticut. But, he replied, “there is no committee for this town, nor do I know of any, for any one town in this county.” There was a “general one for the colony appointed by the honorb House of Representatives,” for which he served as clerk, but because its members were “remote from each other,” Deane was charged with its correspondence. In a similar vein, when Richard Hershaw of Connecticut wrote to Boston about the Coercive Acts, he addressed his letter to William Cooper and marked the envelope “to be communicated to ye Committee of Correspondence, or as you shall think proper.”

In South Carolina about the same time, popular leaders Christopher Gadsden and Peter Timothy (a merchant and a printer, respectively) resumed their long-interrupted correspondence with Samuel Adams alongside the newly-initiated correspondence of formal patriot committees between the colonies. Even before the news of the Coercive Acts reached the colonies, the two

64 In addition to the Deane letters cited below, see William Williams to SA, 30 Jul 1774, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL; Richard Hershaw to William Cooper, 21 May 1774, BCC Papers, NYPL; Samuel Holden Parsons et al. to BCC, 17 May 1774, BCC Papers, NYPL. On the Philadelphia links, see: Charles Thomson to Palfrey, 10 May 1774, Palfrey Family Papers, Houghton Library; Mifflin to SA, 30 Jul 1774, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL.

65 Silas Deane (Weathersfield) to BCC, 13 Jun 1774, BCC Papers, NYPL. Richard Hershaw to William Cooper, 21 May 1774, BCC Papers, NYPL.
patriot leaders were filling letters with sensitive details and political context that they could never have put in public missives. (Since the letters were still traveling via messenger, rather than the post, the correspondents had little fear of exposure.) In late May, for instance, after internal disagreements had kept South Carolina from uniting in support of Boston, Gadsden admonished Adams that he “must not always judge of the Sentiments of the People of Carolina by their Public Meetings.” According to him, they were often dominated by “Ministerial men.”

The news of the Coercive Acts, the British government’s response to the Boston Tea Party, transformed the tone of the private exchanges among patriot leaders. The Coercive Acts (patriots dubbed them the Intolerable Acts) inflicted exemplary punishment on Boston for its destruction of the East India tea. The four new Acts closed the port of Boston until the town made restitution for the tea; dramatically revised the Massachusetts colonial charter to diminish the power of the popular party; allowed royal officials to be tried in England for crimes they were accused of committing in the colonies; and provided new enforcement mechanisms for quartering regular troops in the colonies. As rumors of these acts began to circulate in the colonies, the patriot leaders’ epistolary practice underwent two changes: they began for the first time to give and seek advice and they suddenly began to employ highly emotional language. These changes, I argue, were linked to one another.


68 Robert Middlekauff, The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 227-231. The Quebec Act is sometimes added to this list, but this reflects colonial opinion not Parliamentary intent. Since it was clearly not intended to be a punitive measure like the other Acts, it is best kept separate analytically.
Earlier scholars noted the sudden burst of emotional language in patriots’ correspondence and public rhetoric starting in the spring of 1774. But they naturalized this language, seeing it as the reasonable response of patriotic individuals to the British government’s shockingly disproportionate punishment of Boston. Recent scholarship on the history of emotions, however, suggests a different interpretation. Expressing emotion, and how it was expressed, was always a choice for eighteenth-century people—as it is for us today. This scholarship has shown us that emotion is socially constructed, not a straightforward expression of interior feeling. This constructed-ness is particularly clear in the case of written expressions of emotion. Seen in this light, written expressions of emotion are best treated as literary strategies rather than as faithful transcriptions of the writers’ inner emotional state.

For the patriots writing in the spring of 1774, one purpose of expressing strong emotion was to break the boundaries of mercantile-style epistolarity. Strong emotion gave license to ignore the tenets of epistolary politeness, freeing correspondents from the strictures on offering advice and criticism. The first instance of this linkage came in a letter that Samuel Adams

69 For an example of the view that patriots’ emotional response to the Coercive Acts was natural, see: Ibid., 254 (“The Intolerable Acts…were simply not to be borne…”).


71 Many other kinds of letters existed that permitted the expression of emotion. For instance, expressions of emotion were common in familiar correspondence among family members and friends. Indeed, letter writers often expected or even demanded that their correspondents use emotional language: see Sarah M. S. Pearsall, Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 86-87 and Susan E. Whyman, The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 94-95.
wrote to South Carolina patriots in January, 1774, in the wake of the Tea Party. South Carolina, riven by internal divisions, had not expressed support for the destruction of the tea. Adams wrote them an impassioned letter demanding that they unite and stand up for Boston: “We can’t we won’t believe that those of the colony are wanting in patriotic [zeal].” “If your divisions don’t give way upon this occasion,” he continued, “Carolina will be a dreadfull support of that truth ‘that by uniting we stood & by dividing we fell.’ These are melancholy times.” He concluded with a sentence which can be read as either a prayer or a request. In either case, however, it took liberties that Adams had never taken before: “We trust in your virtue that you’ll never desert your sister colonies in their righteous pursuit.”

The news of the Boston Port Act, arriving in the colonies throughout the month of May, elicited a flood of correspondence in which powerful expressions of emotion mixed with urgent appeals for assistance and offers of advice. Writing to Silas Deane in the middle of the month, Adams indulged in an excess of emotive rhetoric. Boston, he wrote, was now “called to stand in the Gap and suffer the vengeful Stroke of the hand of Tyranny…I trust in God, we shall never be so servile as to submit to the ignominious Terms of the cruel Edict.” At the same time, he adopted a newly imperative tone: “Aid must be speedy,” he wrote, if Boston were to be saved. Richard Hershaw, another Connecticut correspondent of the Boston Committee, announced that when the selectmen of his town called the people to debate the Acts, their “hearts glowed with resentment at ye treatment of the British ministry…there [sic] property yea and there [sic] lives also if wanted will be willingly spent in defense of the liberties of their country.” He then affirmed that the town would “readily” agree to “the small request you make (vizt that of a

72 Samuel Adams et al. to Unknown (South Carolina), 20 Jan 1774, BCC Papers, NYPL.
73 SA to Silas Deane, 18 May 1774, Adams, Writings of Samuel Adams, 3:114.
suspension of our trade with Great Britain).”  The emotional tone of their exchange seemed to have swept away the longstanding barriers to making requests of one another.

From across the colonies, patriot leaders wrote to the Bostonians expressing their horror in one line and offering unsolicited advice in the next. From New York, the Committee of Correspondence wrote: “We want language to express our abhorrence of this additional act of tyranny to America; we clearly see that she is to be attacked and enslaved by distressing and subduing you.” They then “suggest[ed]…measures” to the Bostonians (including calling a Congress), which they had never done before. They even went so far as to admit that these measures might “seem to prolong your distress.” Writing to John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, Samuel Adams deplored the “great Evil” they faced from the British ministry before stating that the Bostonians were “willing to submit…to the Judgment of our Friends, & would gladly receive their Advice.”

In May and June, the newly emotional tone, and thus the ability to break out of the confines of mercantile politeness, was limited to private correspondence among individual patriots. Though we have seen that the formal committees often conformed to the conventions of private letter writing in their official correspondence, they were distinctly less inclined to adopt the language of emotion in mid-1774. Two letters from South Carolina vividly illustrate this difference. On June 5th, Christopher Gadsden wrote to Samuel Adams about the news of the Coercive Acts. He professed that he “would rather see my own family reduced to the utmost Extremity and have cut to pieces than to submit to their [the ministry’s] damned Machinations.”

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74 Richard Hershaw to William Cooper, 21 May 1774, BCC Papers, NYPL.

75 NY Committee to BCC, 15 May 1774, Ibid.

He would sooner “see every inch of my Quay (my whole fortune) totally destroyed” than abandon the “common cause.” An official letter from the Charleston Committee ten days later on the same subject, drafted by Gadsden himself, adopted a far more neutral tone. Like Gadsden’s personal letter, it lamented the “critical and distressing Situation” of American liberties and the town of Boston’s situation in particular. Yet in place of hyperbolic professions of fellow-feeling, the committee merely assured the Bostonians that they were “thoroughly sensible that you are suffering for your activity and Spirit in the Common Cause.”

In spite of their growing ability to discuss tactics with one another in their private correspondence, patriot leaders still felt the absence of a formal system for coordinating inter-colonial opposition. The calls for a new non-importation agreement, to demonstrate colonial opposition to the Coercive Acts, underscored the need for such a mechanism. So at the same time as they began to engage in discussions with one another, patriot leaders in several colonies also called for a face to face meeting to determine the future course of the American resistance. Thomas Mifflin declared to Samuel Adams that “a general Congress of delegates” was a “necessity.” “If you wish to agree in sentiment with us & to lead us on to something effectual,” he continued, “you must humour us in this measure.” Other patriots echoed Mifflin’s view. Silas Deane of Connecticut stated the case most fully:

> a Congress, is absolutely necessary previous, to almost every other measure, since, as the injury is general, the mode taken for redress, ought to be commensurate, which can be, by no means short, of a general conference, & union. The resolves of Merchants in any

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77 Gadsden to SA, 5 Jun 1774, in Walsh, ed. *Writings of Christopher Gadsden*, 95-96.

78 Committee of Correspondence in Charleston to SA, 14 Jun 1774, in Ibid., 97.

79 Thomas Mifflin to Samuel Adams, 21 May 1774, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL.
individual town or province, however generously disposed, must be partial, and when considered in respect to the whole of the colonies in one general view, at best defective.  

He reiterated the point in another letter sent ten days later, this time stating explicitly why he thought a face-to-face meeting was absolutely necessary. “The confidence which subscribers at remote distances from each other, have in one another,” he explained, “can never equal that which will be placed in the resolutions and determinations of a Congress.” Given the epistolary constraints under which we have seen the patriot leadership operated, there can be little doubt that Deane was correct: within the framework of mercantile correspondence, there was little hope of achieving the high degree of mutual confidence that was necessary to develop plans for coordinated action against the British government. For the patriot movement to achieve that level of unity, a congress was “necessary.”

The First Continental Congress and a new network

It would be hard to underestimate the transformative impact of the 1774 inter-colonial meeting of patriot leaders that came to be known as the First Continental Congress. Measured by its ostensible accomplishments, the Congress was a failure: the delegates, deeply divided into radical and conservative factions, managed to do little more than produce yet another statement of their shared principles. The meeting disappointed radical patriots, who had hoped for forceful joint action to defend Boston and American liberties. Yet from the perspective of the culture of inter-colonial organizing, the meeting inaugurated a crucial shift, one which lay the foundation

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80 Silas Deane to BCC, 3 Jun 1774, BCC Papers, NYPL. See also Silas Deane (Weathersfield) [for the CT Cmte?] to BCC, 13 Jun 1774, and Deane (Hartford) to SA, 26 May 1774, both Ibid., and both of which reiterate the point.

81 Silas Deane (Weathersfield) [for the CT Cmte?] to BCC, 13 Jun 1774, Ibid. See also Deane to William Cooper, 20 Jun 1774, Ibid., which reiterates the point.
for the colonists’ increasingly united behavior and their turn to military action in 1775. During the meeting, patriot leaders from across the colonies met in person for the first time and became friendly with one another (though as we will see, these friendships often grew out of pre-existing epistolary connections). They were then able to build a new kind of epistolary network, with greater affective depth than previous inter-colonial correspondences, which served as a medium for systematic tactical coordination and ideological debate among all the colonies.

The transformation of the Sons’ community began even before the delegates arrived in Philadelphia for the Congress. During their journeys, the delegations met one another and began to build trust and deepen their relationships. The Massachusetts delegates, for instance, stopped in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey on their way to Pennsylvania. Later generations have been most impressed by the public celebrations that greeted the delegates in every large town. Before the delegates have even left Boston, they enjoyed a dinner “in company with a large number of gentlemen.” In Connecticut, an overwhelmed John Adams declared that “No Governor of a Province, nor General of an Army was ever treated with so much Ceremony and Assiduity, as We have been, throughout the whole Colony of Connecticutt.” Adams certainly put his finger on something important when he likened their reception to that of a general or governor: the celebrations of the delegates represented the increasing power and authority wielded by the Sons of Liberty.

What happened among the delegates themselves during the travels, however, was just as important as the public pomp and circumstance. We know relatively little about what passed among the Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York delegates as they rode down together to Philadelphia. But traveling together, sharing meals and stops along the way, it is safe to presume

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that the delegates from these three colonies built at least some degree of trust among themselves. The diaries that the delegates kept offer some confirmation that such discussions did take place. On August 17, in New Haven, John Adams reported that the Massachusetts men had “spent the whole Afternoon in Politicks, the Depths of Politicks” with Roger Sherman, one of the Connecticut delegates. The day they arrived in New York, they spent a long time with Alexander McDougall and “talk’d a good deal.” (McDougall, though not a delegate himself, was close with several members of the New York delegation.)

When the Massachusetts delegates and their companions arrived in Philadelphia in late August, the bonds of correspondence they had already created with delegates from other colonies facilitated their face-to-face political strategy. The delegates have frequently been described in the literature as “strangers.” There is certainly some truth to this observation: only a few delegates, including Samuel Adams and Thomas Cushing of Massachusetts, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, and John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, had substantial acquaintance with members from outside their own province. Yet the surviving sources have tempted scholars to exaggerate the degree of unfamiliarity among the delegates. Accounts of the early days of the Congress necessarily rely heavily on the letters and diaries of a few prolific delegates, notably John Adams, Robert Treat Paine, James Duane and Caesar Rodney. Yet these men were almost all from among the ranks of those who had not developed substantial inter-colonial political

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83 Ibid., 2:101, 103.
correspondences before 1774. Their accounts thus make it appear that the Congress was far more an assembly of “strangers” than it really was.

The delegates who had corresponded with one another over the course of the previous years drew on those connections as they sought to build consensus for inter-colonial resistance. Two of the Congress’s first decisions, both about personnel, show the usefulness of the inter-colonial connections that the patriots had worked so hard to build over the course of the previous years. Because the Bostonians were well known to be among the most radical and determined leaders of colonial opposition to Britain, they did not wish to occupy the leadership positions in the Congress. Doing so would confirm the widespread suspicions that they were trying to drive the colonies towards independence. Yet they also did not want to leave the leadership in the hands of a more conservative faction. So the Bostonians worked out a plan to have a “neutral” party nominate sympathetic individuals from other colonies to the key posts of presiding officer and secretary. The South Carolina delegation, including the Bostonians’ frequent correspondent Christopher Gadsden, was among the first to visit the Massachusetts men when they arrived in Philadelphia and saw them repeatedly over the following days. At one of these meetings, they developed a plan to have Thomas Lynch, one of the South Carolina delegates, propose allies of the Bostonians to the key posts.

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86 For the background, see, e.g., Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, 22-29.

87 Lynch was not one of the Bostonians’ main correspondents among the South Carolina delegation, but they were closely connected to him through Gadsden. Though Gadsden was not close to Lynch, they had a longstanding political alliance and had served together in the Stamp Act Congress and in a number of committees in South Carolina. On Lynch and Gadsden, see Walsh, *Charleston’s Sons of Liberty*, 36 and 62-63 and Ibid., 99.

When Congress first met on Monday, September 5, Lynch put in motion the plan that he and the Massachusetts delegation had agreed upon. Lynch nominated Peyton Randolph of Virginia as chair or president of the Congress. Randolph had of course been in direct correspondence with Thomas Cushing since early 1773 and was closely allied with Samuel Adams’s correspondent, Richard Henry Lee. Lynch had not known him personally before arriving in Philadelphia; the introduction most likely came via the Massachusetts delegates. After the delegates elected Randolph, Lynch then motioned for Congress to elect Charles Thomson—another correspondent of the Massachusetts men, also unknown to him personally—as secretary. That motion, too, passed without significant opposition. The choice of Thomson is particularly revealing about the importance of pre-existing epistolary links. Since Thomson was not even a delegate to the Congress, it was his longstanding epistolary ties with the Massachusetts representatives that led them to trust him and ask Lynch to nominate him to the important post of secretary.  

Once the patriots sought to move beyond personnel decisions, however, the shallowness of the ideological and tactical consensus that they had forged via correspondence immediately became clear. The very first debate, over how the voting would work in the Congress, immediately split the radicals into a large-state faction, which favored voting by population, and a small-state faction that insisted on one vote per state. To make matters more complicated, some South Carolina delegates proposed that votes be proportional to the amount of property each state held. With some difficulty, the populous states eventually capitulated and agreed to

Though his word alone is not particularly credible, the circumstantial evidence of close concert between the Massachusetts and South Carolina delegates supports it.

the principle of one state, one vote. Of course, this was a debate that went far deeper than a simple question about voting procedures: it was, at its core, a dispute about the basis of representation in the Congress. And it foreshadowed the debates over the nature of representative government and representation that persisted through the early Republic and well into the nineteenth century.

Deep divisions within the patriot movement arose again a few weeks later when Congress debated whether to adopt a program of non-importation and non-exportation against the British Isles. The time, it was the different economic interests of the colonies that drove the disagreement. Thomas Mifflin first proposed a non-importation agreement to begin on November 1, 1774, a date that was convenient for Philadelphia merchants. Richard Henry Lee, speaking for the Virginia planters, countered with a proposal for non-importation and non-exportation to begin at some point in 1775. Meanwhile, the Massachusetts delegates, desperate to put immediate pressure on the British government in order to force it to reopen the port of Boston, demanded an immediate cessation of imports and exports. The final compromise measure, the Association, proposed an unwieldy schedule that was unlikely to be successful in putting much pressure on Britain: it called for an immediate cessation of East India tea imports and a broader ban on imports starting December 1, but did not begin a ban on exports until


September, 1775. Divisions among the radicals prevented them from pushing through a more effective program of action.92

The radical patriot leaders had more success in developing a united front on the principles of resistance to Great Britain. On September 7, the third day of the Congress’s meeting, the delegates organized a committee of twenty four (two from each colony) to draft a statement of the colonies’ rights and grievances.93 The committee on rights and grievances included many of the radical leaders as well as a number of leading conservatives. Deep divisions quickly appeared between the radicals and conservatives, but the radical camp largely held together. Yet even though the radicals dominated the drafting committee, the resulting Declaration of Rights reflected the very limited level of ideological agreement among them.94 Its main point was the uncontroversial assertion that the colonists ought to enjoy all the “rights, liberties, and immunities of free and natural-born” Englishmen. Yet it did not draw a firm line on even this basic point: several of its articles invoked the principles of natural law, not the rights of Englishmen, to justify American resistance.95

92 Middlekauff, Glorious Cause, 247-248. See also Jerrilyn Greene Marston, King and Congress: The Transfer of Political Legitimacy, 1774-1776 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 111-122 and T. H. Breen, American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang), Ch. 6. Both Marston and Breen see the Association as a success because it helped to consolidate patriot commitments and sentiment on the local level. Yet since this was by no means the main goal of the patriot leaders in creating the Association, a better way of describing it is to say that the Association had unintended positive consequences for the patriot movement.


As important as the agreements they were producing, however, was the socializing the delegates engaged in during the nearly six weeks of the Congress’s meeting. The committees only met a few days a week, and those meetings rarely extended for more than a few hours. For the rest of the day, the delegates ate together and visited with one another. For those who were already in contact with one another via correspondence, these meetings deepened their acquaintance. The delegates who did not already have extensive contacts outside their own province met patriot leaders from across the colonies. Much of the socializing, even for those who did not already have extensive networks, followed the patterns of pre-existing epistolary relationships. The Massachusetts delegation, for instance, included the relatively un-connected John Adams and Robert Treat Paine. But because their delegation spent most of its social time together as a group, these men visited and become well acquainted with Samuel Adams’s extensive network of contact, which included important figures such as John Dickinson, Thomas Mifflin, and Richard Henry Lee.

Of course, not all of the delegates to Congress became friends; far from it. John Adams, for one, found many of them vain, verbose and even ungentlemanly. Yet the simple fact of becoming socially acquainted, sharing a table and a drink—as almost all of them did—had the potential to change the nature of the epistolary bonds among them. Daniel Defoe and others had created their particular model of mercantile letter writing as a way to help merchants cope with the increasingly impersonal commercial world of the early eighteenth century. The mercantile

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96 See, e.g., Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, 132, 134, 137. For a very useful discussion of socializing during Congress, see Barzilay, “Fifty Gentlemen Total Strangers,” Ch. 3.

97 Throughout the diary entries during the Congress, Adams simply referred to the Massachusetts delegates as “we,” and they did nearly everything together: see Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, 118ff.

98 See, e.g., Ibid., 156-157.
epistolary idiom, which had been the grammar of inter-colonial patriot exchanges since 1765, was designed specifically to build confidence among people who did not know one another well. As such, once individuals were socially acquainted with one another, and had other sources of trust on which to draw, the forms of mercantile correspondence became far less crucial. Face to face acquaintance, in other words, made it unnecessary for patriot leaders to strictly conform to the conventions of mercantile epistolarity.

The transformative effect of Congressional sociability is most visible in the correspondence of the ex-delegates in the weeks and months immediately after the Congress ended. In the last months of 1774, the networks of the Bostonians and of many other radical leaders across the colonies changed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The volume of correspondence among patriot leaders increased dramatically as old relationships intensified and leaders formed numerous new links among the colonies. At the same time, the kinds of letters that patriots were writing underwent a significant change. In their letters from late 1774, patriot leaders showed an increased willingness to question and debate one another in the interests of creating tactical coordination. Along with this came a much friendlier and freer tone, consonant with a new model of epistolary relations among the colonial patriot leaders. Before, they had imagined one another as business partners; now, they constructed themselves as familiar correspondents.

New connections appeared among patriot leaders who had not corresponded before in just the three months after the Congress broke up. James Duane of New York entered into communication with William Hooper of North Carolina and with Samuel Chase and Thomas Johnson of Maryland. Johnson and Chase themselves began new epistolary relationships with John Dickinson, George Washington and non-delegate Horatio Gates of Virginia (to whom they
had probably been introduced by the Virginia delegation). Dickinson, for his part, enjoyed a new correspondence with Samuel Ward of Rhode Island—who in turn had begun corresponding with Virginian Richard Henry Lee.\textsuperscript{99} The inter-colonial network of patriot leaders, which as recently as the beginning of 1774 had been essentially limited to about a half dozen leading individuals, mostly in Boston, Pennsylvania and Virginia, had now become a truly inter-colonial affair.

The epistolary relationships among the delegates also underwent a qualitative shift. From the point of view of politics, the most important manifestation of this change was the correspondents’ increasing openness to tactical discussions. In his first letter to Dickinson after Congress, Ward expatiated on the need for “frequent Communications between [the colonies]” and called for exchanges of “All interesting Intelligence.” But he went well beyond simply offering the news from Rhode Island. “Some Gentn. were of opinion that if our grievances were redressed Another Congress would be unnecessary,” he wrote, “but I am of a different opinion.” He then proposed an “Annual Congress” and other measures to Dickinson.\textsuperscript{100} Thomas Johnson, writing in December to James Duane, worried about the possibility that some colonial assemblies might disavow Congress’s resolutions: “I am afraid a Disapprobation of any Article might be of infinite Mischief to our Cause. I should be glad of your Sentiments on this truly delicate point.”\textsuperscript{101} This was the same spirit in which Silas Deane wrote to Samuel Adams in November. In a short letter, he floated the idea of writing an address to the “inhabitants of the West Indies, & of Ireland” and encouraged Adams to produce “a more particular state of your [i.e., Boston’s]

\textsuperscript{99} For these new relationships, see Smith, ed. \textit{Letters of Delegates}, 1:262-308.


\textsuperscript{101} Thomas Johnson to James Duane, 16 Dec 1774, Ibid., 1:273.
situation &…past & present sufferings” to be “circulated…to silence those who endeavor to lessen them.”

The transformation of epistolary style is particularly striking in the case of Dickinson, who had for years maintained a studied diffidence in his correspondence with patriot leaders in other colonies. In a series of letters with New Englanders in late 1774 and early 1775, Dickinson offered advice with increasing urgency. In December, in response to reports of restiveness from Massachusetts, Dickinson urged the virtue of patience. “Procrastination is Preservation. States acting on the Defensive [i.e., the colonies], should study for Delays.” A month later, in response to Samuel Ward’s earlier letter, he also urged delay in order to “keep up the appearance of an unbroken Harmony in public measures” among the colonies. His tone became increasingly monitory in January when he received word that Massachusetts patriots had decided to nullify the Massachusetts Government Act and reinstate their former government. Dickinson declared that the news “has given Me inexpressible Pain of Mind, as it has in my Opinion an evident Tendency to break the present Harmony of the Colonies.” Cushing, in his reply, assured Dickinson that no such measure had been adopted by the Provincial Congress and echoed word for word Dickinson’s call to maintain “the present harmony of the Colonies.” Yet

102 Silas Deane to Samuel Adams, 13 Nov 1774, Samuel Adams Papers, NYPL
105 John Dickinson to Thomas Cushing, 26 Jan 1775, Ibid., 1:301. Dickinson was not alone in his concerns about this putative move. In a remarkable letter to Samuel Purviance of Baltimore, Thomas Johnson explained that he had decided to write to Cushing to persuade him not endanger the chances for reconciliation. He expected his letter to be part of a broader campaign including “J Dickenson” and “Mr. Mifflin.” In order to make sure that he and Purviance were in agreement, Johnson ask him to “peruse the Ltr I write to Mr. Cushing, and if my Sentimts. correspond with yours seal and forward it.” See Thomas Johnson to Samuel Purviance, 23 Jan 1775, Ibid., 1:298-299.
he also observed that it was becoming an increasingly “arduous peice [sic] of work to keep the numerous brave & free People...quietly waiting the event of peaceable applications for the restoration of their Rights.” Without directly contradicting Dickinson, Cushing strongly hinted that redress needed to come soon.¹⁰⁶

The exchange between James Duane of New York and Samuel Chase of Maryland during the same months reveals the newly dialogic nature of the inter-colonial conversation about tactics. Duane and Chase had belonged to different factions: Duane was firmly in the camp of the moderates and Chase (like most of the Maryland delegates) was a radical. In December, New York patriots received word that the Maryland Provincial Congress had initiated a reorganization of its militia. This move, Duane wrote, “here...produces great Anxiety” that it would “inflame the Ardor of our Friends in Boston and precipitate an Attack on the King’s Troops.” To avoid disaster, Duane urged the Marylanders to move more cautiously. He also initiated a debate on what “plan of Union” the colonies should adopt. He questioned Maryland’s plan, which called for a standing American legislature, and asked Chase to share his views of Joseph Galloway’s plan. “In the mean time,” he continued, “suffer me to explain the Light in which it strikes me”—which he did over several pages.¹⁰⁷ In his response, Chase offered a powerful defense of the militia plan as “the only Means, to defend & secure our Liberties” and (after thanking Duane for his “Candor” in offering his view) explained why he thought a colonial legislature was necessary.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Cushing to John Dickinson, 13 Feb 1775, Ibid., 1:310-311.

¹⁰⁷ James Duane to Samuel Chase, 29 Dec 1774, Ibid., 1:277-279.

¹⁰⁸ Samuel Chase to James Duane, 5 Feb 1775, Ibid., 1:304-306.
By the end of January, 1775, in sum, the former delegates to Congress had developed a dramatically improved system of inter-colonial communication and coordination. Underpinned by acquaintances and friendships formed during the meeting in Philadelphia, mostly in the interstices between sessions, these correspondences formed the first functioning dialogic, network of patriot leaders spanning the colonies. Engaged in familiar correspondence rather than mercantile-style exchanges, they could now readily plan for the future, offer advice about measures to take and reproof for ones taken, and debate the merits of various plans of resistance. That these capabilities developed among members of each of Congress’s factions, and indeed between them, suggests that the experience of a face-to-face meeting (and not a particular political position or the need to shore up a faction’s strength) played the essential role in creating a new form of inter-colonial correspondence. The patriot movement, which had spent much of the previous decade struggling against the limitations of its epistolary tools, suddenly found them transformed into a powerful instrument of union among the colonies.

**Coda: the path to independence**

Over a year and a half passed between the end of the First Continental Congress in October, 1774, and the moment when thirteen North American colonies declared their independence from the British empire. It would be radically reductive to claim that the political networks that elite patriots had established by late 1774 led directly from the Continental Congress to the decision for independence. Policies made in Whitehall during those months played a key role in pushing the colonies away from the mother country. Action from below also contributed powerfully to the decision for independence: a massive mobilization and arming of the white populace of the colonies, growing murmurs of discontent among the enslaved
populations of the colonies to the southward, and firefights between organized bodies of troops all helped widen the gap between colonies and metropole.\textsuperscript{109} Just as important, the patriot leadership itself underwent a profound shift in its political views during those months, leading to its momentous rejection of the colonies’ sovereign, George III, and of the institution of monarchy in general.\textsuperscript{110}

Nonetheless, though elite patriot networks were not solely responsible for pushing the colonies towards independence, they played a key role in shaping the colonial response to the changing circumstances of 1775 and early 1776. Indeed, the patriot leadership and its inter-colonial networks if anything increased in importance over the course of late 1774 and 1775. With the old colonial governments collapsing and no functioning central authority yet in place, local patriot leaders increasingly assumed the job of governing their towns and colonies.\textsuperscript{111} The correspondence networks that linked them together became extremely important in managing and coordinating the movement’s political activities. Committees of Observation and Committees of Safety continued the practice of doubled public and private correspondence that patriot leaders had developed under the earlier committee systems. These networks enabled


\textsuperscript{110} On this transformation, see Maier, \textit{From Resistance to Rebellion}, Chs. 8-9 and Nathan R. Perl-Rosenthal, “The ‘divine right of republics’: Hebraic Republicanism and the Debate over Kingless Government in Revolutionary America,” \textit{William and Mary Quarterly} 66, no. 3 (Jul., 2009), and works cited therein.

\textsuperscript{111} On this point see the local studies cited in Ch. 1, esp. Brown, \textit{Revolutionary Politics}, Ch. 9 and Hermann Wellenreuther, ed. \textit{The Revolution of the People: Thoughts and Documents on the Revolutionary Process in North America 1774-1776} (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag, 2006), Part I, esp. 14-18.
them to urge one another to conform to the resolutions of Congress and to more effectively enforce trade restrictions and political conformity.\footnote{See Wellenreuther, ed. \textit{The Revolution of the People: Thoughts and Documents on the Revolutionary Process in North America 1774-1776}, 26-27; Brown, \textit{Revolutionary Politics}, 220-223; and Smith, ed. \textit{Letters of Delegates}, vols. 1-2.} Familiar correspondences among patriot leaders also facilitated the unprecedented level of military coordination among the colonies that enabled the colonists to mount the first successful armed resistance to the British government.\footnote{On inter-colonial coordination, see T. H. Breen, \textit{American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People} (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), Chs. 4-8, esp. 141ff. Though Breen emphasizes the role of ordinary people in creating the American “insurgency,” a considerable amount of his evidence shows that local and provincial patriot leaders played a crucial role in directing and coordinating action among the colonies.}

Even as they knit themselves more closely together, however, American patriot leaders preserved some elements of their old mercantile habits of inter-colonial interaction. Most of the patriots leaders of the 1760s and 1770s acceded to the decision for independence and the creation of a kingless republic, but they did so for different reasons and with varying degrees of enthusiasm.\footnote{See William Liddle, “A Patriot King, or None: American Public Attitude Towards George III and the British Monarchy, 1754-1776” (PhD dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1970), Ch. 8.} Agreeing to disagree about these details enabled patriots to unite in spite of their profound differences of opinion about the wisdom of such a radical break with political tradition. And while it remains to be demonstrated, it may be that the conventions of mercantile letter-writing helped give form to a distinctive American political culture which persists to this day. Observers and scholars have long remarked that American politics from its earliest days displayed more apparent consensus and conformity than its European counterparts.\footnote{The classic statement is Alexis de Tocqueville’s. For scholarly statements, see Louis Hartz, \textit{The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution} (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) and Richard Hofstadter, \textit{The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It} (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).}
monolithic view has been seriously and successfully contested over the past fifty years: it is no longer credible to argue that all of American political life is somehow lacking in conflict. Yet if it is limited to just the American political leadership, the consensual interpretation seems to hold more than a small grain of the truth. Rather than being the result of the absence of feudalism, or an innate quality of the American national character, perhaps that distinctive consensual culture had its beginnings in the beliefs and social practices of the founding generation of American political leaders.
Figure A:

Broadside announcing the formation of the Virginia Committee of Correspondence

**Boston, April 9, 1773.**

Sir,

The Committee of Correspondence of this Town have received the following Information, communicated to them by a Person of Character in this Place. We congratulate you upon the Acquisition of such respectable Aid as the ancient and patriotic Province of Virginia, the earliest Resolvers against the detestable Stamp Act, in Opposition to the unconstitutional Measures of the present Administration. The Authenticity of this Addition may depend upon, as it was immediately received from one of the Honorable Gentlemen appointed to communicate with the other Colonies.

We are,

Your Friends and humble Servants,

Signed by Direction of the Committee for Correspondence in Boston.

[Signature]

To the Town-Clerk of ____________, to be immediately delivered to the Committee of Correspondence for your Town, if such a Committee is chosen, otherwise to the Gentlemen the Selectmen, to be communicated to the Town.

Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman of Distinction in Virginia, to his Friend in this Town, dated March 14th, 1773.

I RECEIVED the papers you sent me, and am much obliged to you for them, our assembly sitting a few days after, they were of use to us. You will see by the enclosed Resolutions the true sentiments of this colony, and that we are determined to bring our first colonies into the British Union with us, that we may RESIST on every step that may be taken by administration to deprive us of one or all of the great privileges of our rights & liberties; we should have done more but we could not procure nothing but news-paper accounts of their proceedings in Rhode-Island. I hope we shall be able to keep in the dark for the future, but we shall have from the different Committee, we earliest intelligence of any motion that may be made by the Tyrants in England, to carry their internal pursuits of enforcing an execution; I dare venture to assure you the British attention will be given on our parts to their grand points.

*In the House of Burgesses, in Virginia, March 14th, 1773.*

WHEREAS the minds of his Majesty’s faithful subjects in this colony have been much disturbed by various rumors and reports of proceedings tending to deprive them of their ancient, legal and constitutional rights.

And whereas the affairs of this colony are frequently connected with those of Great Britain, as well as of the neighboring colonies, which renders a communication of sentiments necessary.

*The Votes and Proceedings of the Town of Boston, and Newburyport, concerning the Congress’s 1s. tribute, and the´enlistment of the two Halfoats.*

In order therefore to remove the mischiefs and to quiet the minds of the people, as well as for the other good purposes above mentioned.

Revised, That a Standing committee of correspondence and inquiry be appointed to consist of eleven persons, viz., the Honourable Parson Randolph, Esq; Robert Carter Nicholas, Richard Bland, Richard Henry Lee, Benjamin Harrison, Edmund Pendleton, Patrick Henry, Dudley Digges, Daniel Carr, Archibald Cary, and Thomas Jefferson, Esq.; any five of whom, or a committee, shall be in the Executive to obtain the most early and authentic intelligence of all such acts and resolutions of the British Parliament or proceedings of administration, as may refer to, or affect the British colonies in America, and to keep up and maintain a correspondence and communication with our sister colonies, by reflecting their important considerations, and the result of such their proceedings from time to time to lay before this House.

Revised, That it be in instruction to the said committee, that they do, without delay, inform themselves particularly of the principles and authority, on which was confided a court of inquiry, and shall have been lately held in Rhode-Island, with powers to transport persons accused of offenses committed in America, no places beyond the seas to try.

Revised, That the Speaker of this House do transmit to the Speakers of the different assemblies of the British colonies, on this continent, copies of the said resolutions, and demand they will lay them before their respective assemblies, and request them to appoint some person or persons, to represent their respective bodies, to communicate from time to time with the said committee.
The first echoes of the American Revolution on the European Continent were heard not in the vast, powerful kingdom of France, Britain’s archrival, but in a small and declining republic, the United Provinces of the Netherlands. As early as 1775, a number of powerful Dutch political figures began to take up the cause of the American rebels. Their commitments, modest at first, grew and evolved during the course of the war. By 1780, a significant portion of the Dutch political elite, especially in the most prosperous province, Holland, had pledged their political and financial resources to the Americans’ cause. These commitments led them into an increasingly serious conflict with the “English party” headed by the Stadholder, William V. This Dutch patriot movement, drawing on the language of the American rebels as well as indigenous traditions of opposition thought, directed its energies after 1780 at the stadholder and, eventually, the regenten (regents; mostly urban oligarchs) as well.¹

Dutch patriot leaders developed a political epistolary culture grounded, like the American patriots’ networks, in pre-revolutionary letter-writing habits. This chapter examines the origins and development of that epistolarity from its roots in the 1770s through the defeat and exile of the patriot leadership in 1787. It show that the pre-1781 regent class, out of which most of the patriot leaders came, used their private correspondence primarily as a tool for elite self-

fashioning. By employing the variety of different registers and letter types available to them, regent correspondents could effectively augment and project their status beyond the borders of their home cities and provinces. The leadership of the rising Dutch patriot movement adapted these pre-existing epistolary models to serve its new political needs starting in 1781. Like the Americans, the Dutch patriot leaders sought to create a network that would help them unify around common goals and at the same time enable them to build up a national following. Yet because the epistolary tools that they inherited were so different from those that the Americans had received, the kind of unity that the Dutch patriots created looked quite different. Instead of the homogenizing, relatively egalitarian epistolary union that the Boston patriots had sought to establish, the regents’ habit of using correspondence to create private, hierarchical relationships reasserted itself. The epistolary culture of the patriot movement quickly became hierarchical and secretive; this, in turn, complicated the elite patriots’ efforts to build bridges between elite patriots and the growing mass patriot movements from below.

A study of epistolary practice suggests that the longstanding division in much of the historiography between “aristocratic” and “democratic” patriots is problematic. As is now well known, the division cannot be sustained on purely socio-economic grounds. Most scholars have looked instead to ideology—that is, to patriots’ statements of their principles—to separate the two groups. Some curious paradoxes have occurred as a result: the very aristocratic Cornelius de Gijselaar, for instance, has come to be associated with the “democratic” party. Yet if we take epistolary practice seriously, as a form of self-construction and self-presentation, it calls into question the usefulness of the terms aristocratic and democratic for understanding the inter-provincial patriot movement. Every participant in the patriot epistolary networks, regardless of status or position, participated in the delicate dance of status creation and status performance
through correspondence that generated the hierarchical order of the Dutch political world and its patriot movement.

This chapter examines the epistolary development of the Dutch patriot movement primarily through the correspondence networks of two leading patriots, the cousins Joan Derk and Robert Jaspar van der Capellen. Noblemen from the rural and poorer east of the Netherlands, they were something of an exception to the rule that Dutch patriot leaders were urban men from the most populous provinces. Yet they were not by any means marginal: Joan Derk’s 1781 pamphlet, *To the People of the Netherlands* (*Aan het volk van Nederland*), which he successfully distributed across the entire country in one night in September, 1781, was probably the single most important factor in sparking the patriot movement. Over the next six years, Joan Derk and then Robert Jaspar became the moral and in some cases practical leaders of the patriot movement. They stand near the center of the web of patriot leaders’ correspondences in the 1780s.

Because the Van der Capellens were in several crucial ways not typical of other patriot leaders, I place them into the broader context of other patriot correspondences. This chapter looks in particular at the Holland regents with whom they were in contact, notably Cornelius de Gijzelaar, Egbert de Vrij Temminck, J.G. Tegelaar, and C.W. Visscher. These men were deeply embedded in the classic, urban patriot milieu, but none of them has left a sufficiently rich and complete archive of correspondence from before and during the *patriottentijd*. I look in particular at the points of overlap between these individuals’ epistolary practice and that of the Van der Capellens; those common elements, I argue, are shared epistolary habits and values of the movement and thus can “correct” the picture of patriot correspondence drawn largely from the Van der Capellens’ letters.
The Dutch political and social context to 1781

Paradoxically, the Dutch patriot revolt, which is so often forgotten or belittled as a minor uprising, emerged from a much deeper history of conflict than either the American or the French Revolutions. Almost since its inception in the late sixteenth century, the Dutch Republic had been torn by the divisions between urban elites, particularly those of Amsterdam, and the stadtholders, the appointed executive officers of the provinces drawn from the House of Orange. The group that opposed the stadtholder and favored government by the urban elites was usually called the States party, after the States General, the sovereign of the United Provinces, which was its power center. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the two parties engaged in an ongoing struggle with the pendulum swinging back and forth every several decades. From 1650 to 1672 and again from 1702 to 1747, the main provinces had no stadtholder and the States party dominated. In the other periods, the stadtholder exercised considerable power in naming regents and controlled the country’s military forces as their commander-in-chief.²

The American revolutionary war brought the latent conflicts between the States and stadtholderian parties out into the open. The stadtholder had a family alliance with the English monarchs that dated to 1688, when stadtholder William III had invaded England and replaced his brother-in-law, James II, on the throne. The States party, always opposed to the stadtholder, had since turned towards France, which now served as its patron. With the American revolt and the French alliance of 1778, the parties lined up clearly on opposite sides of the war: the stadtholder

favored aid to England while the States party pressed for making common cause with France and the new United States. Ideological factors, too, played into this division of opinion: for members of the States party, the American revolt evoked the long-ago glory days of the Dutch Revolt. They saw in the new Republic across the Atlantic an echo of their own struggle against tyranny and global empire—though this time, the world-spanning colossus was England, not Spain. These images were reinforced and encouraged by American patriots, who looked to the Dutch Republic as one of the few models for a successful kingless government.3

This conflict took place against the backdrop of the fragmented political landscape of the Dutch Republic. In the middle ages, the Low Countries (like much of Europe) was divided into a patchwork of sometimes overlapping governments and sovereignties. Though for the most part under the overlordship of powerful princes, both provinces and important towns had a significant degree of self-government and autonomy. The revolt against Spain in the late sixteenth century fixed these distinctive features into the political DNA of the Republic; urban and provincial governments became the most powerful constituents of the Dutch polity into the eighteenth century. Even as the kingdoms around it unified and underwent a degree of administrative centralization, the Dutch Republic remained resolutely committed to its longstanding self-division.4

The Netherlands, by the end of the eighteenth century, was the most densely-settled, intensively cultivated pieces of land in Europe and its overseas possessions. In spite of an ongoing process of ruralization, its population was still heavily urban and better educated than

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4 Israel, Dutch Republic, Ch. 6.
the population of most other regions. This density, higher level of education and urbanized population, along with particular historical conjunctures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, made cities the basic, all-important unit of Dutch political life. With the exception of Amsterdam, they were generally medium-sized affairs, on the order of twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants. Each city had its own group of regents, the generic term in Dutch political culture for members of the ruling elite. These would include a vroedschap or city council, which met every week or two to discuss important issues facing the town; a group of burgomasters, in charge of the daily administrative business of the city; and a secretaris and pensionaris. The pensionaris acted as the highest executive officer of a city or province, and usually had primary responsibility for interacting with other constituted bodies and authorities.5

The enduring power of smaller political units within the Republic placed authority in the hands of the class of individuals, referred to as regenten (regents), who governed them. Regents had extensive governing powers within their own towns, including both administrative, legislative and judicial functions. Those who governed towns that had representation in the provincial assemblies also participated in the selection of representatives and thus in the government of the Republic itself. The vast majority of regents were the descendants of families who had taken on a role in urban and town governments during the early years of the Republic. By the eighteenth century, the position of regents had become mostly hereditary, with new regents in each town appointed from a small group of families and frequently passing from father to son. The situation was somewhat different in the inland provinces and in the north, though power was just as concentrated in a group of families. Hereditary nobles such as the Van der

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5 For this and the next two paragraphs, see Ibid., 328-332 and 1006ff; Price, The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century, 113ff; J. L. Price, Culture and Society in the Dutch Republic during the 17th Century (London: Batsford, 1974), 67ff.
Capellen retained a significant voice in government through their exercise of feudal rights, on the local level, and their representation in provincial assemblies.

By the late eighteenth century, the regent class had not only become an entrenched political oligarchy but had also gained control over the economic and social life of the Dutch towns. The intertwining of the urban elite’s fiduciary and political responsibilities ensured that any man who acquired wealth was eager to enter the regents’ ranks by marrying a regent’s daughter. Marriages also frequently united the regent families of different towns, helping to unify the ruling elite within each province and even among provinces. Supported by their extensive land and financial holdings, regents as a rule did not work for their living. Instead, they devoted themselves to the cultivation of the self and their towns. In the urban context, regents supported theatres, bookstores, concert halls and a range of private educators and intellectuals. In rural contexts, the regents’ wealth contributed substantially to the economic life of the countryside and helped support towns and smaller cities.6

For both kinds of regents, leisure and civic responsibilities were key status markers and very often served as their primary avocation. Young men joined reading and discussion clubs or formed literary circles where they read, played games and conversed. Older men frequented other types of clubs, including Masonic and civic associations. They also undertook considerable responsibilities as civic political leaders. Elite women, in addition to having their own spaces of club sociability, devoted considerable time to informal social calls at one

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another’s homes. All of them, male and female, also cultivated the social arts, particularly dance and music.⁷

Regent letter-writing and self-fashioning, ca. 1770-1781

The urban life of regents took place in what was essentially a face-to-face society, in which they created status and power through dress, manners and conversation. In their interactions with other cities and provinces, however, the regents had to construct themselves as members of the gentry through correspondence. The letters they wrote to individuals in other towns and provinces served as a crucial means for elite regents to fabricate themselves as part of a community defined by its social, economic and political power and distinguished by its ability to engage in leisure pursuits. The workhorse of this epistolary community was a type of familiar letter, distinguished by a friendly tone and the presence of multiple subjects in individual letters and in correspondences. Yet because these missives were also designed to create relations of hierarchy, the letter writers were at pains to demonstrate their gentility. They employed both the material artifact of the letter and stylistic markers to do so, creating a carefully calibrated hierarchical web of inter-provincial relationships.

The physical form of the future Dutch patriot leaders’ correspondence is the most obvious mark of the their special epistolary practice, and also distinguishes it clearly from the letter writing habits of American patriot leaders. The Van der Capellens and their regent correspondents each used a particular size and weight of paper almost all the time. Cornelius de

Gijselaar, for instance, wrote every one of his surviving letters to Robert Jaspar van der Capellen on a standard-size sheet 37 ¼ cm wide by 22 ½ cm high (slightly larger than an A4 sheet). He wrote all but one of them on paper produced by the Dutch stationers J. Honing & Sons. The correspondence sent by Jan Gabriel Tegelaar to both Van der Capellen cousins was almost as consistent: out of forty surviving letters over the course of ten years (1780-1790), all but five are standard size and on J. Honing & Sons paper. The use of paper in these letters is so consistent that when the letters are stacked up, as they are in the archival folders, they form a rectangular object with almost perfectly smooth sides.

The Van der Capellens were also careful with paper, though their practice shows a bit more flexibility than that of either Tegelaar or de Gijselaar. From late 1778 to early 1780, for example, while writing from various locations, Joan Derk van der Capellen repeatedly used paper from the same stock that had an inked black border added as a sign of mourning. Similarly, in a sample of fifty four letters that Joan Derk wrote between 1778 and 1784 to a number of correspondents, twenty five bear a D&G Blauw watermark. The next most common mark, a “Garden of Holland” [tuin] with WB below it, appears on only four letters; most of the

8 Invnmr. 515, Familiearchief Van der Capellen, Gelders Archief, Arnhem. The letter from De Gijselaar to RJ vdC, 8 Jun 1786, is cut to the same size as the other sheets and is of the same quality, but bears the watermark of D&G Blauw.

9 For Tegelaar, see invnmr. 548, FA Van der Capellen, Gelders Archief, Arnhem and invnmr. 74, Collectie J.D. van der Capellen, Nationaal Archief, Den Haag. The only letters that deviate are Tegelaar to RJ vdC, 27 Jun 1790 and 1 Aug 1790 (D&G Blauw paper); Tegelaar to RJ vdC, 29 Oct 1786 (different size and watermark); Tegelaar to RJ vdC, n.d. [1787] (J. Hessels watermark); Tegelaar to RJ vdC, 11 Feb 1788 (IV countermark).

10 We have letters he sent from Zwolle, Appeltern and Amsterdam, all on the same distinctive paper: see VdC to Neufville, 7 Dec 1778 [D&G Blauw countermark]; Dapper, 22 Aug 1780 [top of posthorn]; and Temminck, 19 Nov 1778 [posthorn with D&G Blauw], all in Collectie Van der Capellen, Nationaal Archief. Writing desks might be in public places, but men were more likely to have private space. See Willemijn Ruberg, Conventionele correspondentie: briefcultuur van de Nederlandse elite, 1770-1850 (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2005), 57-58.
rest cannot be definitively assigned to one paper maker or another. Indeed, Van der Capellen was even apologetic when he failed to use fine paper. Writing to Adriaan Valk in 1782, Joan Derk van der Capellen asked him to “excuse this rough paper, I had no other at home.”

The slightly neurotic attention of the Van der Capellen and their correspondents to the quality of the paper they used is best understood as a way of expressing the letter writers’ high social status. The canons of polite epistolarity placed a high value on the material incidents of letter-writing. Stationary, ink and writing equipment were more than simple office supplies: they telegraphed the writer’s status and social position, as well as conveying his or her esteem for the recipient. The insistence by Van der Capellen and his correspondents on using good Dutch writing paper, and producing fair copies of their letters, marked their correspondence out as an exchange among gentlemen of good breeding.

The exceptions to this rule offer additional support to a “status” interpretation of the Van der Capellen network’s use of paper. Van der Capellen’s least aristocratic correspondents, with whom he had a distinctly hierarchical relationship, used poorer and more varied types of paper. One of these was Colonel Dircks, who was acting as one of Van der Capellen’s agents in the United States. In a series of letters to Van der Capellen in 1780 and 1781, Dircks used different paper and a different format (i.e., a different layout of the words on the page) in virtually each one. Much of the paper that he used, moreover, was of the inferior quality that Van der Capellen

11 JD vdC to various, Collectie Van der Capellen. The watermarks on most of the remaining twenty five letters cannot be definitively assigned to a maker because they lack distinguishing features.


13 On this, see works cited below, fn. 21, and Dena Goodman, Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), Ch. 5.
employed for drafts.\textsuperscript{14} Goswinus Erkelens, a Dutch merchant who served as the liaison between Van der Capellen and the revolutionary governors of New Jersey and Connecticut, also used various types of paper in his correspondence, but tended to use the types of paper that Van der Capellen himself reserved for drafts.\textsuperscript{15}

Stylistic elements of the letters sent by the Van der Capellens and their correspondents also served to establish the correspondence as a means of creating and ordering status relationships. They used three different types of salutations. The most common in correspondence with other Dutch people was a calibrated hierarchical greeting: e.g., “WelEdele Gestr. Heer],” “WelEdele Heer,” “Hoog Welgebooren Heer,” or variations on these terms (all of which are usually translated into English as “Noble / Most honorable sir”).\textsuperscript{16} Each writer carefully chose the salutation corresponding to the relative status of his interlocutor—a practice facilitated by the existence of manuals that provided handy lists of these salutations.\textsuperscript{17} Second, they employed a set of non-hierarchical greetings in Dutch, based on the language of friendship, with a smaller subset of correspondents: “True friend [Waarde vriend];” “Veel geagte vriend [Very dear friend];” “Amice [Friend];” “Amicissime.”\textsuperscript{18} Last, when writing in foreign languages

\textsuperscript{14} See Dircks to VdC, 1780-1783, in invnmr. 19, Collectie Van der Capellen, Nationaal Archief.

\textsuperscript{15} See Erkelens to VdC, 1777-1782, in invnmr. 25, Collectie Van der Capellen, Nationaal Archief.

\textsuperscript{16} See, e.g., vdC to Van Pallandt van Zuythem, 5 Nov 1783 in de Beaufort, ed. \textit{Brieven van der Capellen}, 672.

\textsuperscript{17} Jeroen Blaak, \textit{Geletterde levens: dagelijks lezen en schrijven in de vroegmoderne tijd in Nederland 1624-1770} (Hilversum: Verloren, 2004), 121.

\textsuperscript{18} In general, he would begin all correspondence in the hierarchical mode and then switch to this style as appropriate. For example, between 1782 and 1783, he went from addressing Cornelius de Gijzelaar as “WelEdele Gestr. Heer” to calling him “Amice” or “Amicissime.” See de Beaufort, ed. \textit{Brieven van der Capellen}, 374 and 524.
or to foreigners (even if they were writing in Dutch), they would employ the “local” practice: so when Joan Derk Van der Capellen wrote to the American governors Jonathan Trumbull and William Livingston, he wrote Dutch or French forms of “Dear Sir.” To individuals to whom he wrote in French, Van der Capellen usually used “Monsieur.” And he addressed the Comte de la Vauguyon, the French ambassador to The Hague, in proper form as “Monseigneur.”

When they wished to construct a truly equal relationship with a correspondent, Dutch regents had an even more powerful means at their disposal: writing about the self. The most striking example of this practice is Joan Derk van der Capellen’s habit of writing in great detail about his health to other regents. He began one letter to the Fries patriot Coert Lambertus Van Beyma by explaining that he had not written earlier because he had been sick. This in itself would not have been unusual—indeed, as we have seen, American patriots at times offered similar explanations. But Van der Capellen went on to offer details: “[for] eight days I have been unable to stand as a result of being tortured by the incessant pain caused by an ulceration deep in [my] ear. I have thus been unable to hold a pen.” He then mentioned some recent bad political news and lamented aloud his condition “in body and mind.”

Van der Capellen only offered such vivid, even lurid

19 See, e.g., Ibid., 202, 246 and 393.


21 “agt dagen dat ik onophoudelijk door de duldelooste pijn, veroorzaakt door eene versweering zeer diep in het oor, worde afgefolterd. Ik ben dus buiten staat de pen te voeren;” “naar lighaam en geest;” “de teenen aanmerkelijk gezwollen is.” VdC to unknown, 29 May 1784 in de Beaufort, ed. Brieven van der Capellen, 849.
images of his own body to social equals such as Van Beyma. By virtually exposing himself to Van Beyma’s view, Van der Capellen invited him into a relationship of familiar intimacy.

Conversely, just as they used stylistic practices to create equal relationships, regent writers used certain types of letters to construct themselves as gentlemen. Much of their private correspondence was concerned with getting patronage for their clients—a clear mark of status.  

Amsterdam burgomaster Egbert de Vrij Temminck and Pieter de Bleiswijk, the pensionaris of Holland, frequently sought each other’s assistance. In February, 1777, for instance, Bleiswijk asked Temminck to help a client of his, “Heer van Lynde,” in his efforts to gain a local “post.”  

At the end of the same year, it was Joan Derk van der Capellen who was appealing to Temminck to help out a poor relative of his who had joined the East India Company. Van der Capellen’s outgoing correspondence is full of requests to other regents for help getting patronage for his many clients. In 1779, for instance, finding himself unable to get a response to a request for help from a nearby city government, he asked his correspondent Thomassin à Thuessink to seek an immediate answer to his query.  

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22 Clientage relationships and mutual assistance with patronage among regents were important parts of the social glue holding together Dutch towns and cities, so the extension of this practice by correspondence is not at all surprising. See, e.g., Jong, *Met goed fatsoen : de elite in een Hollandse stad, Gouda 1700-1780*, 46-49.

23 Pieter de Bleiswijk to Egbert de Vrij Temminck, 23 Feb 1777, Familiearchief Van Slingelandt - de Vrij Temminck nmr 516, Nationaal Archief, Den Haag.

24 JD vdC to Egbert de Vrij Temminck, 25 Nov 1777, Familiearchief Van Slingelandt - de Vrij Temminck nmr 521, Nationaal Archief.

25 JD vdC to Thuessink, 3 Dec 1779, Collectie Van der Capellen 76, Nationaal Archief.
Adams, who was not part of the regent community, suggests Van der Capellen’s readiness to bring anyone whom he thought willing and able to participate into this particular elite circle.  

A letter requesting assistance in securing patronage for a client was an almost perfect vehicle for fashioning oneself as a member of the elite. Who but a member of the elite, after all, would have patronage to give in return? And who but a superior would be in the position to offer his assistance to someone else in seeking a post? But such letters, though common, still did not make up the bulk of regent correspondence. Indeed, compared to the letters of the American merchants who would become their political allies in the late 1770s, the correspondence of Dutch regents was remarkably heterogeneous. They made full use of the familiar letter’s capacity to bend itself to many different registers and topics—either within the space of a single letter or over time in a correspondence. Letters dealt with topics ranging from genealogy to legal history, from discussions of foreign events to domestic affairs.

Other than requesting patronage, the transmission of information was one of the most important uses to which future patriot leaders put their private correspondence. Yet even though information transmission was not inherently a status-making act, regents observed an etiquette that allowed them to mark their social status and that of their correspondent. In correspondence with other regents, the Van der Capellen cousins and others of their status adopted one of two strategies. Most often, they simply included short passages of information in a longer letter that included analysis, discussion and debate about news and policies—almost as one would in a

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26 See JD vdC to Valk, 7 Apr 1782 and 14 Apr 1782, both in de Beaufort, ed. Brieven van der Capellen, 279-281 and 282-285. The second of the two letters encloses a copy of John Adams’s letter explaining why he could not satisfy JD vdC’s request.

27 See Blaak, Geletterde levens: dagelijks lezen en schrijven in de vroegmoderne tijd in Nederland 1624-1770, 119-122.
This method quietly ensured that one’s correspondent was informed without either making the potentially insulting assumption that he was not abreast of events, or putting oneself in the degraded position of newsletter writer. On the occasions when regents did write exclusively to convey news, they wrote a specific type of missive. It was unusually short—at most both sides of a sheet half the size normally used for letters—and often written in a somewhat informal style. These notes were often little more than the cover for transmitting a packet of printed or other non-epistolary documents.

Regents related very differently to informants who were their social inferiors. With them, they established newsletter-style correspondences: the regent received long letters filled with information and responded with much briefer missives. The Amsterdam publisher and merchant J.G. Tegelaar, for instance, entered into such a correspondence with Joan Derk van der Capellen. Tegelaar’s letters adopted a reportorial voice not unlike that which was common in the letters of American patriots, with their immersion in the culture of mercantile epistolarity. A letter sent in late December, 1780, for instance, began by promising to inform him of “all that

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28 For this model, see E.F. van Berckel to RJ vdC, 21 Dec 1775, Familiearchief Van der Capellen nr 502, Gelders Archief and JD VdC (A’dam) to Van Berckel, 9 Nov 1778, Collectie Van der Capellen 6, Nationaal Archief. See also Bentinck (Hague) to VdC, 18 Sept 1773, Collectie Van der Capellen 4, Nationaal Archief.

29 See for instance the letters in Brieven van den raadpensionaris P. van Bleiswijk aan den burgemeester E de Vrij Temminck betreffende de verhouding tot Engeland en hiermede in verband staande zaken van admiraliteit, Familiearchief Van Slingelandt - de Vrij Temminck nr 516, Nationaal Archief.

30 Examples of this are VdC (A’dam) to Temminck, 19 Nov 1778; Bleiswijk (Hague) to Temminck, 2 Sep 1775; Bleiswijk (Hague) to Temminck, 23 Feb 1777, Familiearchief Van Slingelandt - de Vrij Temminck nr 521 and 516, Nationaal Archief.
occurs here [today].”31 A week later, after war was declared with England, Tegelaar wrote to inform him about “the state of affairs,” reporting on exactly when he had “received the great news” and providing a detailed chronology of the events that had taken place since his last missive.32 Tegelaar also adopted a deferential tone in his letters to Van der Capellen, using formal salutations and excusing himself for the slightest impositions on his correspondent’s time.33

In sum, for the Dutch regents who would become the leaders of the patriot revolt, epistolary exchange was as much about creating and maintaining social status as it was about the ostensible subject of the correspondence. On the local level, where they were physically present, regents could rely on their dress, speech and carriage to convey their social position to others. But to project their status at a distance—to fashion themselves as members of the regent elite on a national scale—they had to rely on epistolary practices. They did so using the flexible and capacious practices of familiar correspondence, adapting salutations, topics and much else to reflect and reinforce the nature of the relationship between sender and recipient.

**Epistolary practices of the early patriot revolt, ca. 1781-1784**

Following the publication of Joan Derk Van der Capellen’s explosive *Aan het volk van Nederland* in the fall of 1781, regents across the Netherlands began to organize themselves to more effectively oppose the stadholder and seek the restoration of their traditional liberties and a

31 “Heeden zullen de... Heer Adams, schiet my wynig tyds over, om UHWGebr te melden alles wat hier passeert.” Tegelaar to JD VdC, 23 Dec 1780, Collectie Van der Capellen 74, Nationaal Archief.

32 Tegelaar to JD VdC, 26 Dec 1780, de Beaufort, ed. *Brieven van der Capellen*, 220-222.

33 For examples, see the above and Ibid., 230-231 and 515-516.
return to public virtue. On the local level, as it always had, most organizing took place through face to face discussions. But as regents from different provinces sought to connect with one another and make common cause—like their American predecessors—they turned to pre-existing networks and established practices of inter-provincial correspondence to build the framework for a national patriot movement.

At the outset, the Dutch patriot movement seemed to have significant advantages over its American predecessor. Extensive epistolary networks already existed within each province: Joan Derk van der Capellen was in contact with leading political figures in Deventer, Zwolle, Arnhem and other key towns in Overijssel and Gelderland.34 Future leaders of the Holland patriot movement—including Van Berckel, De Gijselaar and Temminck—had extensive correspondence with one another and with political leaders across the province. These groups were also connected to one another across provincial boundaries before 1781: Van Berckel, for instance, corresponded with the Van der Capellen cousins as early as 1775. And the letters of De Gijselaar, Temminck and other to the Van der Capellen in the early 1780s indicate that they were continuations of longstanding correspondences, not new creations.35 As a result of this significant pre-existing base, virtually all of the patriot regents were in communication with one another by 1782. In under a year, the Dutch patriots had built a network of private correspondences that rivaled or exceeded that of the Americans in its comprehensiveness and reach.


35 The first surviving letters from De Gijselaar to each Van der Capellen date to April, 1782 (RJ) and September, 1782 (JD). Though the letter to RJ vdC is not a first letter, it is signed by name and uses the formal “UEdgr zeer dienster en geheert dienaar” closing formula: see De Gijselaar to RJ vdC, 23 Apr 1782, Familiearchief Van der Capellen nmr 515, Gelders Archief.
Yet the way in which the Dutch patriot leaders communicated with one another was quite
different from how the Americans did it. In keeping with their longstanding epistolary practices,
the patriot regents took pains to ensure that only those they deemed socially and politically
acceptable could gain access to the network. Indeed, their practice at time verged on secret
correspondence, a striking contrast to the virtually public letter writing practices of the
Americans. The differences began with the creation of the letter. American patriot leaders, as
we have seen, frequently composed their letters collectively in public spaces. Dutch patriots did
neither. Joan Derk van der Capellen, for instance, wrote the vast bulk of his letters at home.36
He avoided co-writing letters: among the hundreds of incoming and outgoing Van der Capellen
letters, including the published and unpublished correspondence, there are no more than a tiny
handful that were written or signed by more than one individual. The Holland regents followed
similar practices: the archives reveal almost no letters written collectively and regular use of the
same paper consistent with composition only at home.37 The Dutch patriot regents, to employ
the metaphor of conversation, carried on a series of one-on-one epistolary dialogues, which offer
a striking contrast to the epistolary group discussions that the American patriots undertook.38

Van der Capellen’s solicitude for the secrecy of his letters and his desire to ensure that
they remained purely between himself and their recipient, did not end once he had sent them. By

36 This is indicated both by his use of the paper from a single stock for most letters and the fact
that most of his letters are written from either Zwolle or Applertern, where he had homes.

37 For the practice of the Holland regents, see Familiearchief Van Slingelandt - de Vrij
Temminck nmr 521 and 516, Nationaal Archief; and Collectie Cornelius de Gijselaar nmr 19,
Nationaal Archief, Den Haag.

38 On this connection, see Bernard A. Bray and Christoph Strosetzki, *Art de la lettre, art de la
conversation, à l’époque classique en France: actes du colloque de Wolfenbüttel, octobre 1991*
(Paris: Klineksieck, 1995), passim and Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to A
Form* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982), Ch. 4.
1783, at the latest, he was systematically seeking to reclaim his outgoing letters from their recipients at regular intervals. He explained the practice to the nobleman Van Pallandt in a late 1783 letter: “I take the liberty of asking you to save my letters, so that we can return [our letters] to each other. I do this with all of my correspondents. I intend to burn those from your excellency.”39 A few months earlier, he had actually exchanged his letters with De Gijselaar, taking care to ensure that they were passed only through trusted hands and even so that they remained “sealed.”40 By getting his own letters back, Van der Capellen ensured that they would not fall into the wrong hands if anything happened to his correspondents. Yet this practice also reinforced the already strong sense that letters were intended only for their recipient—and nobody else.

By all the evidence, patriot leaders were also extraordinarily cautious about sharing letters with one another or with wider audiences. Unlike the Americans, who readily passed on letters that they had received to third parties, including printers, the Dutch patriot leaders followed a far more restrictive set of rules. As his letter to Van Pallandt suggets, Van der Capellen expected his correspondents to keep hold of his letters. In other cases, he explicitly urged his correspondent to destroy the letter: he ended one missive to his cousin with the injunction to “Burn this and believe me still, / Your friend / U bekend [i.e., the one known to you].”41 A burned letter, of course, could not be shared more widely. The archives themselves also attest to the degree to which Van der Capellen and others retained their incoming letters

39 “…neeme ik de vrijheid UwHW. te verzoeken mijne brieven te willen bewaaren, om ze elkander te kunnen weergeven. Ik doe zulks met alle mijne correspondenten. Die van UwHW. meen ik alle verbrand te hebben.” JD vdC to Van Pallandt van Zuithem, 5 Nov 1783, de Beaufort, ed. Brieven van der Capellen, 678.

40 “gecachetteerd.” See JD vdC to De Gijselaar, 19 Mar 1783, Ibid., 526.

41 JD vdC to RJ vdC, 15 Aug 1782, Ibid., 327-332
rather than disseminating them. The fact that the Van der Capellen, De Vrij Temminck and other family archives of patriot leaders are relatively complete strongly suggests that the writers did not share their correspondence with others. If they had, we would expect a much higher rate of letter loss. And indeed, Van der Capellen noted while clearing out his deceased father’s desk that he had kept “absolutely all of [his] incoming letters” and “clippings” but no “general writing” at all.42

The Dutch patriot regents used their epistolary relationships as one of their tools to create a hierarchy within the patriot movement—with Joan Derk van der Capellen firmly occupying its center. A number of Joan Derk’s correspondents took pains to tell Van der Capellen that he was the father of the patriot movement. Hendrik Hooft—an important regent patriot in his own right—assured Van der Capellen as early as 1780 that he was certain that he would soon be recognized as one of the most important men ever to live in the Netherlands, “both here and in other lands.”43 J.G. Tegelaar, for his part, fantasized in 1780 that Van der Capellen would be “at the head of the Overijssel government [in] 1781.”44 After Van der Capellen was reinstated in the Overijssel government in 1782, Hooft wrote again to assure him of his key role in the patriot movement.45

42 JD vdC to RJ vdC, 12 May 1780, Ibid., 177ff.
43 “zo hier als in anderen landen.” Burgomaster H Hooft to JD vdC, 10 Mar 1781, Ibid., 222-224.
44 Tegelaar to JD VdC, 26 Dec 1780, Ibid., 220-222.
Joan Derk van der Capellen responded to the adulation of the patriot movement by assuming a posture of disengagement from politics. “I am so deep in my own affairs,” he wrote in a May, 1780, letter to his cousin Robert Jaspar, “that I do not think about the political world.”46 Two years later, after the publication of Aan het volk van Nederland, he was still asserting his own naivete: “In truth, I have not read any political writings since 1775, and I therefore lack a well-developed opinion.”47 Or, as he wrote in a particularly fine passage of a letter to the Comte de la Vauguyon (France’s ambassador to the Netherlands) in late 1782: “believe me that, far from wishing to involve myself in great affairs, it is only by doing violence to my natural penchant for solitude and by sacrificing the little bit of health that remains to me, that I [am able to] perform the role, which I am made to play in the political world.”48 This posture of disinterest and self-sacrifice functioned, in the context of these correspondences, as a means for Van der Capellen to reestablish his high status: the only thing higher than high office, after all, was not to want it.

Given the nature of their private correspondence, it comes as no surprise that when the patriot regents decided in 1783 to create a formal inter-provincial network, they chose to create one which reflected its secretive and hierarchical character. At the first meeting where this was discussed, in August, 1783, Robert Jaspar van der Capellen proposed the creation of a formal system of inter-provincial patriot correspondences. Nothing could be more important, he wrote in his draft plan, than forming “a greater and more intimate correspondence among the

46 JD vdC to RJ vdC, 12 May 1780, de Beaufort, ed. Brieven van der Capellen, 177-178.
47 JD vdC to Valk, 7 Apr 1782, Ibid., 279-281.
48 “soyez persuadé que, bien loin de vouloir m’ingerer dans de grandes affaires, ce n’est qu’en faisant violence a mon penchant naturel pour la retraite et en sacrifiant le peu de santé qui me reste, que j’exécute le rôle, que l’on me fait jouer dans le monde Politique.” JD vdC to De la Vauguyon, 2 Dec 1782, Ibid., 393-395.
representatives, the governments of the seven provinces.” The system he wished to create would be federal, like the Republic itself, but designed to channel information via “men of proven loyalty.” The basic structure would be a correspondence among the “well-intentioned patriots,” who would then choose “a representative to correspond with the representatives of the other provinces.” He would first correspond with the member from one or two other provinces (he divided the Netherlands into three “departments:” Gelderland and Utrecht; Holland and Zeeland; and Friesland, Overijssel and Groningen) and then they would coordinate with the other departments. In times of need, the members would meet in person in Amsterdam, “in order to avoid any offense,” and communicate their decisions back to their respective provinces to be diffused throughout the network.49

During the subsequent discussion, Jacob Nanning du Tour, the secretaris of Alkmaar, raised a number of questions about the plan. Would the position of corresponding member be a temporary or a lifetime appointment? How would they be chosen? What procedures would they follow in case of disagreement? The most telling question he raised, however, was “What security is there for the papers of the correspondents in case of death?”50 This question clearly elucidates the personal nature of the correspondence system that Van der Capellen envisioned. Since the letters would be the personal property of the corresponding members, they would pass to (possibly unsympathetic) heirs if one of them died. On the recommendation of F.G. Blok of

49 “een meerdere en intimer correspondentie onder de Leden, de Regering der 7 Prove;” mannen van een beproefde trouwe;” “wel geintentioneerde Patriotten;” “Een lid…om met de Leden der andere Provincien te corresponderen;” “om alle aanstoot te vermijderen.” Plan van correspondentie zo als hetzelve in den bijeen komst ond. 16 Aug 1783 is voorgedragen, FA Van der Capellen nmr 561, Gelders Archief.

Leiden, a correspondent of both Van der Capellen cousins, the meeting also decided to limit the scope of the correspondence to ordinary business, leaving any larger debates over the movement’s strategy either to local initiative or to be decided upon at face-to-face meetings.51 The largely informational purpose of the correspondence union was reiterated and its specific duties enumerated during the next meeting of the patriot regents, in October, 1783.52

Van der Capellen’s proposal and the discussion around it offer a striking contrast to the proposals for inter-colonial systems of correspondence made by American patriots in the 1760s and early 1770s. Americans like Arthur Lee and Samuel Adams had also planned to restrict active participation in their networks to politically reliable gentlemen. Yet they did not envision a closed, elite network like the one that the Dutch patriots sought to create. As we saw, the Boston Committee did more than facilitate communication among patriot leaders: it also claimed to speak for the “people” of Boston (and in some cases Massachusetts) and its correspondence incited other localities to form committees that made similar claims. This relative openness to non-elite participation was, as we saw, connected to the habits of mercantile correspondence. At the same time, the American Committee of Correspondence system was thoroughly decentralized. Every community could have one, and they expected to correspond on more or less equal terms with one another. The Van der Capellen plan, on the other hand, envisioned a relatively small group of patriot leaders directing the network from the center, deliberating amongst themselves and diffusing information outward to satellite clubs and eventually the populace. Not coincidentally, this hierarchical model of formal inter-provincial communication, tightly governed by the patriot elite, mirrored the dominant private epistolary practices of the

51 “bij provisie de correspondentie over de dagelijks voorvallende zaken zoude houden.” Ibid.
52 Ibid., 140.
patriot leadership. As we will see in the next section, this system proved unable to unite elite and non-elite patriots into an effective patriot movement.

**Schutterij, Utrecht and a divided movement, 1784-1786**

Starting in the fall of 1783, the patriot movement began to expand rapidly beyond a small kernel of the regent elite. First in the city of Utrecht and then across the provinces, growing numbers of middling individuals, many of whom lacked formal political power, began to come together into patriot societies and clubs. These clubs, too, soon began to establish communication with one another. Like the American patriot societies, they saw strengthening the moral union of the patriot movement as an important motive for mutual exchanges. Unlike the American societies, however, the societies and their networks remained essentially separate from the patriot elite and their correspondences. Nowhere was this divide clearer than in Utrecht; and nowhere was the paradoxical quality of the patriot clubs’ correspondence more evident. The leaders of the Utrecht patriot militia were the first to advance democratic ideals in the Republic, yet they remained enmeshed in the aristocratic style of letter-writing with all its attention to status and hierarchy.

Efforts to organize a more broadly-based patriot movement “from below” began across the Netherlands during the first months of 1783. Not coincidentally, this occurred shortly after the Netherlands signed a treaty with the United States in October, 1782, marking a significant victory for the patriot party and its pro-American agenda.53 In January, 1783, with the encouragement of patriot regent Cornelius de Gijselaar, a group ofburghers in the Holland town of Dordrecht formed a paramilitary political society open to all who wished to take part, which

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they called the Free Corps. Other towns soon followed their lead: by the middle of the year, similar societies, variously called exercitiegenootschappen (lit., “exercise societies”) or Free Corps, had been formed in important towns across the provinces, including Rotterdam, Utrecht, Deventer, Zwolle and Kampen.54

Like much else in the patriot movement, the Free Corps drew on a combination of old and new ideas and practices. Or rather, in stereotypical Dutch fashion, the organizers of the Free Corps movement fitted their new creations into the traditional structures of the Republic. A very old precedent existed for the Free Corps in the form of the urban militia or schutterij. These institutions of medieval foundation had played a crucial role during the revolt against Spain, helping to organize urban defense and maintain urban order in the absence of regular troops. They had undergone a steep decline since the revolt’s end, so that by the early 1780s, the schutterij were little more than a color guard for annual urban rituals. Nonetheless, the simple existence of these militia—and the powerful myth of burgher military self-sufficiency that they embodied—served to legitimize the creation of the new militia groups in the 1780s.55 Once formed, the Free Corps in every town asked the local government for recognition and, in many cases, to be allowed to take the place of the schutterij.56


56 See Schama, Patriots and Liberators, 84.
Though they invoked centuries-old practices and ideals to legitimize their formation, the Free Corps departed in at least two important ways from those traditions. While the traditional *schutterij* had been limited to those with property and in some cases even just to those who enjoyed the freedom of the city, membership in most Free Corps was open to all individuals, even those who had little or no property. This relative social openness made the Free Corps far more representative of the full range of urban society than their predecessors had been.\(^{57}\) More important still, the Free Corps developed a leadership structure that was markedly more democratic than that of the *schutterij*. Though the *schutterij* held elections, they had become entirely pro forma by the end of the eighteenth century, invariably resulting in the choice of a select group of regents. The Free Corps instituted a practice of electing their leadership from within their own ranks. Reflecting longstanding habits of social deference, the members for the most part chose well-off individuals to be their leaders; yet the simple fact of choosing non-regents for leadership positions was a significant change.\(^{58}\)

Once they had formed, the patriot militias sought to build links with like-minded groups elsewhere in their provinces and across the Netherlands. Yet unlike the patriots from the regent class, many of whom had longstanding connections with one another across provincial boundaries, the Free Corps and reformed *schutterij* did not have pre-existing networks. Even where the Free Corps took over an existing *schutterij* infrastructure, such as in Utrecht, they had to start from scratch because the militia company was fundamentally a single-city institution;

\(^{57}\) On the regulations of the *schutterij*, see Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 121. On the Free Corps, see Te Brake, *Regents and Rebels*, 119-120.

\(^{58}\) For evidence of these tendencies in Deventer and Utrecht, see Te Brake, *Regents and Rebels*, 81-82 and Hulzen, *Utrecht in de patriottentijd*, 56-61. For a perspective that emphasizes the relative autonomy of the *schutterij*, see Price, *Culture and Society in the Dutch Republic during the 17th Century*, 80.
there was no tradition of inter-urban (let alone inter-provincial) contact among companies. Ironically, the process of creating links with other towns was made more difficult by the democratic practices of the new militia companies: their leaders, specifically not drawn from the local regent elite, lacked the experience in provincial and inter-provincial politics for which a role in urban politics was a prerequisite.

Nor did local regents, who might have helped the patriot militias build connections with like-minded people elsewhere, offered much assistance. There was of course extensive communication between the militia companies and their local regents in the form of face to face interactions and petitions proffered by the companies to the town governing bodies. Yet more often than not, the relationship between the patriot militias and the town governments was adversarial. In Utrecht, for instance, the militia repeatedly pressured the regents to dismiss Orangist members and (in 1785) to incorporate Free Corps candidates into the government.59 The story was similar in Deventer, where the regents at first sought to keep the Free Corps at arm’s length, only to have the militia force them to incorporate its leaders into the city government in 1784.60 In a few cases where the conflict between the militia and the town government became serious enough, as in Rotterdam in 1784, the provincial government stepped in and took the patriots’ side. But these moments of solidarity between local militia and regent patriot leaders were rare.61


60 Te Brake, Regents and Rebels, 82.

61 On Rotterdam, see H. T. Colenbrander, De patriottentijd: hoofdzakelijk naar buitenlandsche bescheiden, 3 vols. (Den Haag: M. Nijhoff, 1897), 2:67-71 and Schama, Patriots and Liberators, 87-88. Another case of pressure from below, though without the involvement of the provincial
Instead, the militia leaders and their local allies turned to the newspapers to communicate with one another. The two most important patriot organs, the *Post van den Neder-Rijn* and the *Politieke Kruyer*, both included large numbers of letters. Indeed, many issues were composed entirely of correspondence. The vast majority of these letters were unsigned or had only pseudonyms attached to them. The pseudonyms, in good late eighteenth century fashion, offered little information about the sender; they were drawn from myths classical (Catophilus) and non-classical (Batavus), as well as appropriate everyman appellations (“Jan de Soldaat” offered advice on “military service” while “H. Vrijburger” commented on Utrecht’s constitution). Some letters, like that of Jan de Soldaat, were little more than a thin conceit to cover for learned discussions of current affairs. Almost all of the writers adopted a formal tone but wrote as

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63 *De Post van den Neder-Rijn*, 4: Inhoud.

64 Ibid., 4:251-255. The writer describes himself repeatedly as a “gemeen Soldaat”—a bit more insistently than seems consistent with it being the truth—and goes on to explain that the officers (“braave Officieren”) bought them the *Post* “want wij arme Soldaaten worden” (251). The letter makes extensive use of complex rhetorical strategies such as hortatory interjections—”Heb dank, Mijnheer!”—that are suspiciously skilful for an “ordinary soldier” (253). It is also notable that the letter from “Jan de Soldaat” is not dated.
though to social equals, using the appropriate salutations (usually “Mijnheer!” or “Mijnheer de Post!”) and a minimally deferential valediction (such as “Ik ben &c.”).\textsuperscript{65}

More often than not, the Post adopted a hortatory or didactic voice, emphasizing the need to promote unity within the patriot movement. “There is no more useful virtue for a country or people…than unity, [for] without [it] the prosperity of land or people cannot endure,” lectured the editor at the beginning of one 1784 issue.\textsuperscript{66} These calls for unity became particularly insistent as the situation in Rotterdam deteriorated. “I close this [letter] with the earnest wish,” wrote one patriot to the Post, that everyone work hard to sustain the “necessary unity, not only among the citizenry, but also among their representatives.”\textsuperscript{67} Of course, these calls for unity could also be used to advance a more specific agenda. One letter writer in 1784, for example, discussing the situation in Utrecht, argued that a “burgher government” was the “way, to bring our hands to strike in unity as one” and thus to protect their “freedom.”\textsuperscript{68}

A number of the letters offered enough details to constitute meaningful communication among patriots in different parts of the Netherlands in spite of the cloak of anonymity their authors employed. The Post published many letters with announcements of the formation of Free Corps groups and accounts of their activities. In mid-1784, for instance, a patriot in Hoorn from a “Patriot family” wrote to announce that a “small spark of freedom-fire is beginning to

\textsuperscript{65} See, for example, Ibid., 4:87, 95, 98.

\textsuperscript{66} “Er is voor een Land of Volk geen nuttiger deugd tot behoudenis van hunne Maatschappij dan de Eendracht zonder dezelve kan de welvaart van Land of Volk niet bestaan.” Ibid., 4:41.

\textsuperscript{67} “zoo noodzakelijke Eendracht, onder de Burgers niet alleen, maar ook onder derzelver Vertegenwoordigers.” Ibid., 5:886.

\textsuperscript{68} “burgherlijke Overheid;” “de weg, om onze handen, door Eede verbonden, eendragtig in een te slaan;” “Vrijheid.” Ibid., 4:82.

Ibid., 4:275.

Ibid., 4:362.


See, e.g., De Post, 4:123.
movement with a means to exchange vital information and to alert one another to challenges that it faced from Orangists and patriot regents alike. The editorial practices of the newspapers also foster a sense of community and facilitated a modicum of discussion within the popular patriot movement. Like the correspondence among Sons of Liberty groups in the American colonies during the 1760s, the exchange of letters in the Post and Kruyer helped create a sense of moral unity among socially equal patriot gentlemen.

Division between regent patriots and the patriot militia movement grew increasingly stark over the course of 1784. In early 1784, the Utrecht Free Corps groups called for a national meeting of representatives from Free Corps across the nation. Regent patriots were not invited. Though mostly ceremonial, the meeting was fruitful enough that the Free Corps leaders began to meet on a regular basis. At their third meeting, the Free Corps leaders drafted an Act of Union (Acte van verbintenis) for the patriot militias. This document was a “program of democratic patriotism,” which called for a radical expansion of popular participation in the governance of the Republic and an end to the domination of both the regents and the stadholder.74 This was followed a few months later by a manifesto with even more radical elements, the Leiden Draft (Leidse ontwerp), which used powerful natural rights language to argue for a radical reshaping of the Dutch polity.75

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In spite of the growing radicalism of the patriot militia movement, its relations with the regent patriot leaders remained highly hierarchical. Regent patriots, including De Gijselaar, Van Berckel, Van Beyma and the Van der Capellen cousins, regularly received letters from patriot clubs and militia companies across the Netherlands. The societies wrote to offer congratulations on specific achievements or to invite the nationally-known figures to join their society as honorary members.\textsuperscript{76} Though patriot militias maintained face to face relations with their own local regent elites, these primarily epistolary relationships with the national patriot leadership had an important place in the moral and practical life of the militia movement. As symbols of patriot virtue, the national leadership could lend some of its prestige to less distinguished patriot militia.\textsuperscript{77} And as the most powerful political figures in the patriot orbit, they were well positioned to lend a hand to militia companies embroiled in disputes with local politicians.

The surviving letters from militia companies to national patriot leaders are almost embarrassingly obsequious. The Utrecht exercitiegenootschap Pro Patria et Libertate, for instance, greeted Van der Capellen in rapturous terms in 1783:

\begin{quote}
what it proposed was “voor een deel van de regentenvergadering dan ook beslist acceptabel.”
Klein, Patriots republikanisme, 252.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{76} For JD van der Capellen, see de Jong Hendriksz., Van der Capellen, 664-679.

It is in your footsteps, o hero! that we are so willingly following! In order to show that we will willingly be your sons! O loving father! … See how living fire sparkles from our eyes! O freedom’s lover!78

The patriot society in Arnhem wrote a short while later to his cousin, Robert Jaspar, in similarly ecstatic terms. Their letter began with this salutation: “Most noble Sir! Faithful advocate of fatherland and freedom! Our [dear brother]!” They went on to praise him for his unshakeable loyalty to the cause of liberty and enthusiastically extended the hand of “brotherhood” to him.79

After Joan Derk’s death in 1784, the militias redirected their adulation more fully towards his cousin, Robert Jaspar. In late 1785, for instance, a patriot society wrote to invite him to become an honorary member. They expressed their confidence in him and his leadership in deferential terms: “A Capellen – a true friend of the burgher – will explain freedom to us.” (In a patriot movement in which freedom was the highest value, this was surely the highest vote of confidence that a society could offer.) They declared themselves “convinced” that he would listen to them and work with them in order to advance the patriot cause.80

The largest number of these letters of tribute arrived in 1786, the same year in which the mass patriot movement was most fully radicalized. Much of the incoming correspondence from the societies was on extra large sheets of heavy paper, with the opening and closing formulae

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78 “Het is op uw voetspoor, o Heldt! dat wy die zoo gewillig hebben aangegrepen! Om te toonen dat wy uw zoonen willen zyn! O liefderijke vader! Wat hebben wy om uw te zien verlangd! O wat schept dat gezigt in ons een niewen eenen helden moet! Ziet hoel het leefde vuur uyt onze oogen glinsterd! O vryhyds minnaar!” 291, Collectie Van der Capellen, Nationaal Archief.

79 “Hoogwelgeboore Heer! Getrouwe voorstander van vaderland en vrijheid! Onze Hoogeschatter meede Broeder” Arnhem genootschap to RJ vdC, Nov 1783, FA Van der Capellen nmr 496, Gelders Archief.

carefully calligraphed. The Leiden schutterij, asking for Robert Jaspar’s help in 1786, addressed him as “great man!” and “brave defender of the people’s legal rights!” They asked him to bring his authority and reputation to bear in favor of a new constitution for the Netherlands. The Delft schutterij sent him a long poem, elegantly calligraphed, which praised him immoderately. It was his “virtue,” they wrote, that had protected the Netherlands from “tyrants:” “We [and] the Netherlands, do offer you tribute!” The poem from Delft is all the more remarkable because it is signed by Gerrit Paape, one of the leading lights of the “democratic” movement within the patriot party.

**Conclusion: 1787 in epistolary perspective**

The first Dutch patriot movement came to an end just a few months after Paape sent his poem to Robert Jasper van der Capellen. In the early fall of 1787, after months of hesitation, Frederick Wilhelm II of Prussia sent his army into the Netherlands to support his brother-in-law, the stadholder, in his efforts to regain control of the Netherlands. A divided and weakened patriot movement, though ostensibly in control of governments across much of the Republic, proved unable to offer much resistance. The Netherlands was overrun in a matter of weeks. Stadholder William V returned to The Hague and initiated a massive purge of the government at

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81 Data for this paragraph is drawn from letters in Ibid.

82 Leiden schutterij to RJ vdC, 10 Jun 1786, Ibid.

83 Delft schutterij to RJ vdC, 13 Jun 1786, Ibid.

all levels, removing virtually everyone with patriot sympathies from positions of authority. Those who had been most deeply involved in patriot politics fled to France.85

Historians have identified a number of factors that contributed to the rapid and complete defeat in 1787 of a patriot movement that enjoyed a fairly wide and deep base of support. The patriots’ lack of military training and discipline and the French government’s failure to come to their aid were certainly two crucial determinants of their collapse in the face of Prussian troops. Yet for many scholars, the fundamental cause of the movement’s failure was the internal division between the movement’s “democratic” and “aristocratic” factions. This division has usually been depicted as a profound ideological gulf between supporters of fundamental reforms to the state and those who wished to maintain the power of the regents while instituting some relatively minor reforms. This disagreement set regent patriots increasingly at odds with the upstart Free Corps and their allies, hampering every effort to organize a common front against the Orangist threat until it was far too late.86

The evidence of patriot correspondence suggests a somewhat different picture of the divisions within the Dutch patriot movement on the eve of its collapse. What is perhaps most striking about the correspondence of the Free Corps is the degree to which it did not change; the “democrats” did not adopt a more “democratic” set of epistolary practices. Among themselves, in the form of articles in the Post van den Neder Rijn and the Kruyer, the patriot militia members wrote just the kind of letter that were appropriate to their status as mostly middling gentlemen:

85 On the defeat and the flight to France, see Colenbrander, Patriottentijd, vol. 3; Theo van der Zee, J. G. M. M. Rosendaal, and Peter Thissen, 1787 : de Nederlandse revolutie? (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1988); J. G. M. M. Rosendaal, Bataven! Nederlandse vluchtingen in Frankrijk 1787-1795 (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2003), Part I.

86 For this view, see inter alia Schama, Patriots and Liberators, 88ff; Wit, De nederlandse revolutie, Ch. 4; Velema, Republicans, 115ff; and Israel, Dutch Republic, 1103ff.
their letters drew on habits of polite correspondence among social equals to create moral unity and to permit some degree of discussion of principles and political strategies. But crucially, they were similarly conservative in their correspondence with their social superiors. Even as they took increasingly radical stands, the Free Corps members remained highly deferential to the patriot regents with whom they were supposedly allied. This deference, integral to the status-bound epistolary practice of the regent elite and its subjects, raised a high barrier to dialogue, discussion and thus coordinated political action between the two groups of patriots. The “radicals’” conservatism, in other terms, not their radicalism, lay at the heart of the patriot movement’s failure to consolidate itself.
Figure B: A letter between elite patriots (l) and a letter from a patriot society (r).

Note the much more elaborate calligraphy of the letter from the patriot society as well as the taller sheet (not to scale; the full sheet is nearly twice the size of the letter on the left). The width of the space between the salutation and the body of the letter is a mark of respect.

Sources: Thuessink to JD van der Capellen, 9 Apr 1780, Collectie Van der Capellen, Nationaal Archief, Den Haag (l); Genootschap ten Spreuken Voerend to RJ vdC, Oct 1785, FA Van der Capellen nmr 496, Gelders Archief, Arnhem (r).
In the old Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, in the high-ceilinged salon that serves as the reading room for Western manuscripts, sit eleven red-bound volumes labeled “Papiers des Rolands.” They contain, all told, roughly a thousand letters that Jean-Marie and Marie-Jeanne Roland, husband and wife who became leading figures in the French Revolution during the years 1792 and 1793, wrote with each other and with their friends. This collection of letters, which has never been the subject of a systematic study, is one of the most complete archives of two major French revolutionary figures to survive to the present day. As one pages through the creased, rapidly-written letters, the events of the Revolution from its earliest days to the eve of the Terror unfold. Yet even though this represents one of the most complete records of a group of patriots entering the maelstrom of revolutionary politics, the Roland circle’s correspondence is much more than a simple testament to the group’s growing political involvement. Like their American and Dutch predecessors, the Rolands become patriots in part through their letter writing practices: letters helped shape the kinds of political networks they built for themselves and the forms of sociability and political exchange in which they engaged.

Scholarly letters provided a major template for the Roland circle’s political correspondence. Like many other future radical Jacobins, the Rolands and their friends were deeply involved in science and the republic of letters under the old regime. During the decade before 1789, their non-family correspondence was primarily academic and scholarly in nature: it centered on the struggle to gain academy memberships and the minutiae of botany, industry,
medicine and husbandry. In this correspondence, whether discussing scientific or literary matters, the Rolands and their circle engaged in vigorous back-and-forth with their interlocutors and worked to create bonds of friendship or familiarity with them. As the circle’s attention shifted to politics during the summer of 1789, their correspondence transitioned from scholarly to political subject matter. By that fall, politics had almost completely displaced academic subjects in the circle’s letters. Yet even as its subject matter shifted, the physical form, literary style and network structure of the correspondence remained almost unchanged. The persistence of these epistolary forms was not without consequences for the Rolands and their circle: their political engagement was inflected by the forms and habits of scholarly letter writing. They created relatively small circle of correspondents, demanded that they engage in debate and discussion, and liberally shared and copied their letters with one another. These practices contributed to the significant differences that emerged between the political culture of radical patriots in France and the culture of their brethren in the Netherlands and America.

Though this chapter and the next use evidence drawn primarily from the Roland circle, they aim to make broader arguments about the nature of political organizing by radical patriots during the early years of the French Revolution. Because the correspondence of very few prominent Jacobins have survived in anything like their complete state, we have little choice but to rely heavily on the few (such as the Rolands) who left a more complete record. Yet this dependence on the Roland circle’s archive naturally raises the question of whether they can be seen as representative of the early Jacobin movement in general and whether conclusions drawn about them can be applied more broadly. To mitigate these concerns, I have sought wherever possible to set their experience alongside those of other radical patriot leaders in order to confirm their typicality.
Becoming scholarly correspondents in Old Regime France

A group of five men and one woman formed the core of the Roland correspondence network. At its heart were the Rolands themselves: Jean-Marie Roland, an inspector of manufactures and future Minister of the Interior, and his wife, Marie-Jeanne Roland. François Lanthenas, a medical doctor, was the couple’s oldest friend of the other four: he had met Roland even before he married Marie-Jeanne Phlipon, while the two men were traveling in Italy in 1776 and 1777. Next to join the “family” was Louis-Augustin Bosc, an aspiring botanist and functionary in the postal administration, who met the Rolands in 1780 at a course at the Jardin des Plantes. Jacques-Pierre Brissot, a hack writer and would-be philosophe, became attached to the circle in 1787 after speaking admiringly of Roland in his book, *De la France et des Etats-Unis...* (France and the United States; 1787). In the same year, Jean-Henri Bancal, a wealthy Paris notary, got to know Bosc and Lanthenas; however, he did not enter into direct communication with the Rolands themselves until 1790.¹ Perhaps not coincidentally, half of the members of the group happened to come from a relatively small area in south-central France: Roland from the Lyonnais, Lanthenas from Le Puy and Bancal from Clermont-Ferrand.

Although they had different professional backgrounds and social statuses, these individuals shared an engagement in the world of scholarship and the republic of letters. Bosc was a practicing natural scientist. Roland engaged in what we would call today applied science: he wrote numerous memoirs on manufacturing techniques and technologies and edited two volumes of the massive *Encyclopédie méthodique* (Systematic Encyclopedia) brought out during

¹ For biographical details on these individuals and discussions of when they first met members of the Roland circle, see Claude Perroud, ed. *Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1900-02), Appendices K-Q and works cited below.
the 1780s by Panckoucke, a leading philosophe publisher.² Brissot, for his part, wrote on a number of topics at the boundary between scholarship and practical reform, including state finances, religious liberty and the alleviation of poverty.³ Lanthenas and Bancal, though they did not publish during the old regime, avidly read the works of leading philosophes and reformers. Lanthenas also became involved, through the Rolands, with some provincial academies.⁴

The socio-professional identity that the Roland circle shared was typical of the individuals who became the radical leaders of the patriot movement over the next several years. Some of them were quite successful in these pursuits. Robespierre, who spent much of the 1780s writing for academic prize competitions, became president of the local academy in Arras in 1786. Barbaroux, Barère and Vergniaud were all members of local academies in their hometowns and had achieved varying degrees of wider renown. Collot and Louvet had both achieved success as writers, though in less reputable fields (as a playwright and novelist, respectively). Even those who were less successful before the Revolution were nonetheless clearly seeking to enter the world of writers and scholars. Billaud-Varenne, Fabre d’Eglantine, Desmoulins and Carra—to name only a few—were all working hard in the 1780s to become

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known as literary figures, while Marat was seeking entry into the elite circles of medical practice.\textsuperscript{5}

The Roland circle’s members, like their future patriot colleagues and indeed most early modern scholars, relied on a network of correspondents for intellectual nourishment and companionship.\textsuperscript{6} Roland’s closest epistolary relationships, after those with the four main friends mentioned above, were with members of provincial academies, including Néret, fils (of Rouen), Maret (of Dijon) and Bernard (of Marseille).\textsuperscript{7} He also maintained a lively correspondence with François De Zach, an astronomer and member of the Royal Society.\textsuperscript{8} Bosc, the son of a


\textsuperscript{7} See Perroud, ed. \textit{Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793}, Appendice H and Le Guin, “Roland de la Platière.”

renowned medical doctor and savant, had more illustrious contacts, who included the
crystallographer Rome de l’Isle and the geologist Faujas de Saint-Fond. He even got an
invitation to join the Comte de La Pérouse on his voyage around the world; fortunately, he did
not go on that ill-fated expedition. ⁹ Though he was perpetually dissatisfied with his standing in
the world of savants, even Brissot had quite a respectable network of correspondents, which
included the Du Pont family, the Marquis de Condorcet and political economists such as Etienne
Clavière and Mirabeau. ¹⁰

But there was more to creating a scholarly correspondence than simply writing to
scholars. Form and style mattered as well. And as in most forms of eighteenth-century
epistolarity, the conventions of scholarly letter-writing were well-defined and, though usually
unwritten, familiar to those who used them. ¹¹ Anne Goldgar has shown that scholarly
epistolarity in the eighteenth century was supposed to be polite; that it strongly encouraged
substantive exchanges and mutual aid among researchers; and that it revolved around specialists
and trained authorities—those bearing degrees, academy memberships and other badges of their

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⁹ See Perroud, ed. *Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793*, II:672-674 (Appendice K: Bosc) and
Mss 1009, Papiers Louis-Augustin Bosc d’Antic, Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris,
Paris ff. 85-147. See also Charles Coulston Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France at the End of
interpretation is considerably less charitable towards Bosc.

¹⁰ On his circles in the old regime, see Eloise Ellery, *Brissot de Warville: A Study in the History
of the French Revolution* (New York: Benjamin Franklin, 1970), Chs. 2-3 and Loft, *Passion,
Politics, and Philosophie*, passim.

¹¹ I believe most of this familiarity came directly from reading and writing letters rather than
from letter-writing manuals, for which see Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of
Letters* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), Ch. 4. However, for another opinion, see:
Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-
accumulated cultural-scientific capital.\textsuperscript{12} Another way of putting this is that scholarly epistololarity drew on the canons of civil conversation: it was to be a gentlemanly dialogue, at once productive and socially respectable.\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, one was ideally supposed to be friends with one’s scholarly peers.\textsuperscript{14}

Scholarly correspondence also had certain conventions that, though not as substantive as the constraints of politeness, served to mark it as distinct from other types of eighteenth-century epistololarity. With respect to its physical form, scholarly letters generally conformed to the canons of polite letter writing: one always used fine paper and wrote carefully and legibly. It was, in this sense, closer to the aristocratic letter-writing model that the Van der Capellens followed than to the workaday mercantile epistololarity of the American patriots.\textsuperscript{15} With few exceptions, moreover, scholars used the post to communicate with one another. This differed markedly from the habit of merchants—especially those involved in long-distance trade—who

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\textsuperscript{13} On this analogy, see especially Matthew L. Jones, \textit{The Good Life in the Scientific Revolution: Descartes, Pascal, Leibniz, and the Cultivation of Virtue} (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 93 and works cited therein.
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\textsuperscript{14} On the role of friendship in early modern scientific networks, see especially Chaplin, \textit{First Scientific American}, Ch. 3 and Miller, \textit{Peiresc’s Europe}, Ch. 1. For a broader discussion of the friendly ideal in eighteenth-century French correspondence, with particular attention to the formal properties that helped to create it, see J. W. Howland, \textit{The Letter Form and the French Enlightenment: The Epistolary Paradox} (New York: P. Lang, 1991), 37ff.
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\textsuperscript{15} On French scholarly epistololarity in the eighteenth century, see Brockliss, \textit{Calvet’s Web}, 96-104. For an excellent discussion of the differences between mercantile and polite epistolarity in late eighteenth-century Anglo-America, see Konstantin Dierks, “Letter-Writing, Gender, and Class in America, 1750-1800” (PhD dissertation, Brown University, 1999), 95-99. To my knowledge, no comparable study exists for France in this period; however, since the variety of epistolary styles was remarkably consistent across the Euro-American world, this discussion can be extended, at least provisionally, to France.
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tended to send their letters via private messengers, especially ship’s captains and other merchants. The Rolands and their circle were, in all these respects, typical scholarly correspondents: they wrote carefully and legibly, on good paper, and transmitted their letters almost exclusively via the post.  

The Roland circle’s letters also conformed closely to the dialogic convention of scholarly correspondence. Consider a series of letters that Roland and Néret exchanged in 1781 and 1782. The second one began with Néret repaying a small debt and then asking Roland his opinion of a recently published book by M. Rigaud and inquiring what kind of “sensation” it had caused in Amiens, where Roland was living at the time. The bulk of the letter then debated methods for raising sheep in the “rainy climate” of Northern France in terms that combined practical agronomy with political philosophy. “You wish, Sir,” Néret wrote, “that [our sheep] may no longer be locked up [indoors]…I think, as you do, that the loss of liberty destroys beings physically as well as morally, but I have so often heard [on m’a tant repeté] that damp causes sheep to die, that I am fearful” that the climate of Northern France will kill them. In his reply, Roland promised to assuage his correspondent’s “worries” about the sheep that he “love[d].” “But we will go back to our sheep,” he added, “once I have responded to your first questions [premieres demandes].” The bulk of the long letter and much of the next two, from Néret, went on to discuss in fine technical detail a proposed canal to be built in the nearby town of St. Quentin. 

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16 The letters of the Roland circle themselves demonstrate that they were sent via the post: almost without exception, they bear postmarks. The paper on which they sent letter was almost uniformly good paper, probably of Dutch manufacture. There is no comprehensive comparative study of the modes of carriage that were employed by mercantile and scholarly correspondents; see Ch. 1 of this study.

17 “sensation;” “Vous voudrez, Monsieur, que les notres cessassent d’etre renfermés et couchassent a la belle etoile ; je pense comme vous que la perte de la liberté, denature les etres,
Such dialogues were common throughout the pre-revolutionary correspondence of the Roland circle. In a 1788 or 1789 letter to Bose, with whom he was good friends, the agronomist Philibert-Charles Varenne de Fenille thanked him for a correction he had made to a piece of writing he had sent: “I think you are right. Confused by the [different] weights of green wood and dry wood, I mistakenly called one the scientific weight. I am obliged for the comment and will make good use of it.”18 Lanthenas, likewise, asked for Roland’s “advice” on several issues and offered his thoughts about the “polemical writings about animal magnetism.”19 Nor were the discussions in the network limited to one-on-one exchanges. In an undated letter from 1784, Lanthenas reported on correspondence with several savants at once, including a M. Parault and the Doyen of the Faculté at Reims.20 And as we will see in a moment, Bose, who served as a conduit for many of the group’s letters, often added his own thoughts at the same time as he transmitted a letter.

The circle filled its correspondence with requests for scholarly assistance.21 In early 1789, for example, Roland was hurrying to finish the next volume of his encyclopedia and found


himself unable to extract any information from local artisans, “boutonnés jusqu’aux dents,” about the manufacture of whips. So he wrote to Bosc. “Oblige me,” he wrote in this brief letter, “by getting a description of all of the kinds of whips: 1° the shape, length and width of all the parts, that is to say of each; 2° the nature and quality of the material; 3° [etc.].” After posing all his questions, he then asked Bosc to “pass a copy of my note to Lanthenas, so that he can ask around as well [crie aussi de son coté].” Bosc and Lanthenas were apparently happy to be able to help him with his research needs. Roland’s casual and direct manner suggests the frequency with which the members of the network made requests of one another and their certainty that they would be fulfilled.

Requests for favors did not even need to be scholarly in nature. In 1786, Maret wrote to Roland to ask him to investigate the man who was paying court to one of his nieces. He needed to know “what his family is, who are his acquaintances, what the fortune of his father is.” Conscious that he was asking Roland to investigate a “delicate” matter, he hastened to assure him that he would not be “compromised.” “Your letter, once read by myself and my sister, [though] not the one who is the mother of the girl to be married, because she is too weak, will be burned immediately.”

As this letter suggests, the members of the Roland circle wanted to be friends with their intellectual collaborators. Such friendships were common in the Roland correspondence network even beyond the core group of six. De Zach, for instance, began a 1784 letter to Roland by

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22 “Obligez moi de me prendre une notice de toutes les sortes de fouets: 1° la forme, longueur et grosseur de toutes les parties, c’est à dire de chacune; 2° la nature et qualité de la matière…;” “passer une copie de ma note à Lanthenas, pour qu’il crie aussi de son coté” Roland to Bosc, 14 Feb 1789, N.A.F. 9534.

23 “quelle est sa famille, quels sont ses entours, quelle est la fortune de son pere;” “Votre lettre une fois lue par moi et par ma sœur, non pas celle qui est la mere de la fille a marier, car elle est trop foible, sera brulée sur le champ.” Maret to Roland, 11 Mar 1786, N.A.F. 22422.
congratulating him on a recent achievement and then immediately chiding him for working too hard: “if, by force and excessive work you ruin your health,” he wrote, “you will [have to] entrust yourself to magnetism.” Bosc also maintained close friendships with several of his collaborators, especially Varenne de Fenille, with whom he exchanged letters nearly every week. The connection between this kind of intimacy and the circle’s scholarly pursuits is particularly clear in a late 1787 note from Roland to Bosc, worth quoting in its entirety:

Partisan of the system and the work of the great Lavater, welcome his friends. He did me the kindness of addressing to me the Baron Vietinghoff, a Russian, and the chevalier Heisch. I owe him a great debt. I do you the same favor, and I have reason to hope, once you have met these men, that you will be under the same obligation to me.

Your various tastes and your numerous acquaintances will soon make you friends [vous mettront bientôt en rapport]. Go together [courrez], converse, speak of me sometimes, and love me always. I embrace you, farewell.”

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24 “Je vous félicite…mais je vous gronde que vous ne vous laissez pas le moindre repos. Vous savez c’est la plainte générale que vos amis portent unanimement contre vous et puis si à force et mainte travail vous delabrez votre santé, vous vous confiez au magnetisme.” De Zach (London) to Roland, 17 dec 84, N.A.F. 22422.

25 They exchanged over forty letters in 1789 alone. See Mss 1009, Papiers Bosc, BHVP.


Roland’s mixing of scholarly practices (“converse”) and subjects (“the system…of the great Lavater”) with personal attachment (“speak of me;” “love me”) in this letter suggests vividly that he believed friendship went hand-in-hand with scholarly connection.27

The ideal of free communication and exchange, coupled with the friendships within the network, created an environment rich in collaborative letter-writing and letter-sharing. Many of the letters in the network were written by more than one person. In some cases, one person simply wrote in the name of a group of people.28 But often, particularly in letters among the core members, more than one hand was visible on the page, marking the letter instantly for the recipient as a collective product (see Figure A). One writer often specified that he or she had written the first part of the letter and then left the letter open on the table for the other writer to read over and then write a second portion.29 In some cases, the second writer might then leave the letter open again to allow the first writer to add to the letter.30

Another striking sign of the network’s highly collaborative writing and reading practices was their habit of passing a single letter through multiple hands. This appeared briefly in the letter in which Roland requested information about the manufacture of whips. A similar practice

27 On the culture of friendship in the old regime and the continuum between apparently true, deep friendship and ritualistic expressions of friendship, see Kenneth B. Loiselle, “‘New but true friends’: Freemasonry and the Culture of Male Friendship in Eighteenth-Century France” (PhD dissertation, Yale, 2007), esp. 59-61.

28 See, e.g., Lanthenas to the Baron de Servières, 18 dec 1787, N.A.F. 9534. For an example of this in the Anglo-American context, see Kate Davies, Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 208-209.


30 See, e.g., Mme Roland and Lanthenas to Brissot, 29 janv 1791, 446 AP 8, Papiers Brissot de Warville, Archives Nationales, Paris.
is in evidence in a letter Lanthenas wrote to Roland during the 1780s, which reported on his correspondence with De Zach, with whom Roland had put him in touch. Lanthenas noted apologetically that he had “neglected to write to M. Dezach [sic] for several days after having received his letter.” But he assured Roland that he would “give a letter to one of his [De Zach’s] friends before leaving Paris” and enquired whether Roland had anything to “enclose with it.”31 Lanthenas was thus proposing himself as an intermediary for Roland even as he himself was availing himself of an intermediary to get his letter into De Zach’s hands.

A particularly striking illustration of the collaborative epistolarity fostered by the network appears on the wrappers of some of the letters from Lanthenas to Roland. When writing to someone in Paris, the members of the network often sent their letters via Bosc. (As an official in the postal administration, he had special privileges and could ensure more reliable, secure carriage of their letters.) On a number of these re-expedited letters, Bosc would add notes on spaces left blank by Lanthenas.32 In one instance, Bosc added a short note to the wrapper in which he apologized for not saying his “adieux” to Mme Roland and asked Roland to pass them on. In another, he announced the receipt of a letter for Roland but said he would not send it on until Mme Roland “has read it.” In a third, he let Roland know about the arrival of a new book about “oils” that he was going to read and then send on.33

Although such bonds of friendships were commonplace in early modern scholarly networks, one thing made the Roland network highly unusual: the presence of a woman, Mme

31 “J’avais négligé de quelques jours d’écrire à M. Dezach après avoir reçu sa lettre…je remettrai avant de quiter Paris une lettre à un de ses amis…si vous avez quelque chose à y joindre, vous pourrez me le faire passer.” Lanthenas to Roland (Amiens), n.d. [1784 ?], N.A.F. 6241.

32 Lanthenas to Roland, mai 1784, N.A.F. 6241. See also Lanthenas to Roland, n.d. [1784 ?], Ibid.

33 “en aura pris lecture” Bosc to Roland in Lanthenas to Roland, mai 1784, N.A.F. 6241.
Roland, at its center. To be sure, it was not uncommon for wives of savants and philosophers to take part in their husbands’ scholarly communities: famous examples include Mme D’Holbach, Mme Lavoisier and Mme Condorcet. But Jeanne-Marie Roland was different: she carried on an independent correspondence with a number of the men in the circle. She exchanged letters with François Lanthenas and Louis-Augustin Bosc throughout the 1780s, and then added an intense epistolary friendship with Henri Bancal beginning in mid-1790. These correspondences were, on all the evidence, truly her own: many of the letters dealt with different subjects from her husband’s and all convey the sense of a direct bond between Mme Roland and the other men.

Mme Roland’s autonomous role in the network had implications for the kinds of exchange that took place within it. As scholars have long recognized, but only recently begun to fully explore, female epistolarity in the eighteenth century was distinct from the practice of male letter-writing. Women were taught primarily to write phatic, narrative and familiar letters, rather than the business, financial and intellectual letters that dominated the correspondence of men. Mme Roland, although clearly the intellectual equal of her husband and a master of scholarly inquiry, was no exception to this rule. The differences between their letters come into particularly sharp focus in the valedictions: where Jean-Marie Roland would end a letter with a simple “salut” or “vale,” she ended with elaborate formulae. “Adieu,” she ended one 1788 letter


to Bosc, after describing an inoculation she had witnessed, “I wish you a peaceful heart, and everything that can season it for your complete satisfaction; and if you are still our good friend, as I hope, I embrace you with all of my heart.”

Mme Roland’s letters also differed in a more profound way from those of her male counterparts. They express a constant consciousness of the conflicts between scholarly and ordinary life, largely absent from the letters of the male members of the group: evidently, charged with managing a household, she had more experience of these conflicts than her male peers. “I did practically no work yesterday,” she wrote to Roland in late 1782, “we covered the jams … I did better this morning, but in the final calculus, I didn’t [finish] more than ten pages of [business letters].” Or, as she wrote to Bosc, in a letter from late 1788, she would “not speak…about the news” because she was “completely busy with having oil made and pork salted: things very important for the household but little suited to the epistolary genre.”

The collective practices of the Roland network, notwithstanding the differences between the styles of individual correspondents, add up to a distinctive, scholarly epistolarity. Their letter-writing was characterized by a commitment to openness and exchange; a willingness to ask questions and request favors; and a consistent effort to establish friendships among the scholars in the network. The group of individuals participating in the exchanges was relatively small and

36 “Je vous souhaite la paix au cœur, et tout ce qui peut l’assaisonner pour votre entière satisfaction ; et si vous êtes toujours notre bon ami, comme je l’espère, je vous embrasse de tout mon cœur.” Mme Roland to Bosc, 6 avr 1788, Perroud, ed. Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793, 7.

37 “Je n’ai presque pas travaillé hier; nous avons couvert des confitures… J’ai mieux fait ce matin: mais, au bout du compte, je n’ai pas plus de dix pages d’expédiées.” Mme Roland to Roland, 6 nov 1782, Ibid., I:204.

38 “Je ne vous parle pas de nouvelles ; je suis toute occupée d’huile à faire faire, et de porc à saler : objets fort intéressants dans le ménage et peu faits pour le genre épistolaire.” Mme Roland to Bosc, nov 1788, Ibid., 34.
they expected to share, exchange and collaborate on letters. Most important of all, it was
dialogic: the participants expected to be questioned, challenged, and probed, and to have the
right to do the same in return.

Did this very specific epistolarity create a distinctive form of scholarly subjecthood
during the old regime among the members of the network? In recent years, scholars have argued
that the modern “self” as we conceive of it—that is, as an autonomous individual or subject—is
created in good measure via the twin processes of relational behavior and self-reflection. They
also recognize that dialogue, whether face-to-face or through letters, is one of the main practices
by which individuals relate to one another and reflect on themselves. As Charles Taylor has put
it, one becomes a person “in conversation”—or, as Dena Goodman adds, in correspondence.39

Though it is difficult to argue with any certainty about the selfhood of long-dead people,
we can draw some tentative conclusions about the Roland group based on their correspondence.
Clearly, the network fostered a sense of the self as profoundly related to others. Indeed, given
the degree to which academicians relied upon one another for information, advice and
discussion, it is reasonable to assume that the self, insofar as it was a scholarly self, could not
exist outside of a community. Yet the related-ness of a member of the Roland network was still
limited: they engaged in intensive letter exchanges with only a small group of trusted scholar-
friends. Connecting to these people, not to just anyone, made them into subjects. These
characteristics of the Roland circle’s subjecthood, shaped by their epistolary habits, persisted into
the new regime and had a distinct impact on their political organizing.

39 See Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the
Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5-6 and Charles Taylor
quoted in Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, 3.
Becoming revolutionaries: epistolarity and political engagement

In 1789, the Roland network began its transformation from a collection of moderately successful scholars into a coterie of revolutionary leaders. This section examines the process by which they developed a “revolutionary mentality.” Put in other terms, it examines the paired processes by which the members of the Roland group became active participants in patriot politics and came to think of themselves as political actors. 40 This account builds on recent work by Timothy Tackett on the political trajectories of the deputies of the National Assembly and five relatively minor provincial patriots. Tackett sees correspondence primarily as a good barometer to measure individuals’ growing political engagement and commitment. 41 But for the Roland circle, it was something more. Particularly for the members of the circle who were not in Paris, letter writing itself offered one of the most important kind of engagement. It was writing letters to their friends in Paris that spurred the Rolands to become political agents and enabled them to see themselves as political actors for the first time.

The Roland circle quickly began turning its attention to politics as the crisis of the monarchy deepened in 1788 and early 1789. By the summer, the engagement had become so deep that Mme Roland denied the propriety of even discussing anything else: “It’s true,” she

40 How and when patriots developed a “revolutionary mentality” is a venerable question in the history of the French Revolution. The debate exists in a number of forms. One manifestation is the debate over whether sociétés de pensée, such as academies, literary circles and salons, lay the basic groundwork for the Revolution. The most recent contribution to this discussion is Antoine Lilti, Le monde des salons : sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Fayard, 2005). Another manifestation of the debate is the substantial scholarship on the cahiers de doléances (bills of complaints) produced by constituencies across France in 1789, in response to the convocation of the Estates General. On this debate, see especially Gilbert Shapiro et al., Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de doléances of 1789 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

wrote to Bosc, “that I don’t tell you about our personal affairs any more.” But, she asked, “who is the traitor who has [affairs] today other than those of the nation?”42 A few months later, just before the news of the October Days reached her, she insisted to Bosc that in the face of the critical state of the nation, “all sorrow ceases, all pain is suspended, all personal matters are set aside [s’éteint].” One doubts that the members of the circle truly did put aside their personal feelings entirely (indeed, she herself often broke this supposed rule), but this suggests the depth of political commitment to which the circle aspired.43

Until at least mid-1789, however, members of the Roland circle expressed an essentially spectatorial perspective on politics. Such an attitude was of course the norm under the old regime, when only a very small number of individuals enjoyed an active role in politics.44 Thus in one early 1788 letter, Bosc related to Bancal the current political controversies in Paris. “The day of your departure, dear sir, the princes of the house of Condé and the Comte d’Artois submitted a memorandum to the King,” he began. He then narrated the reception of that document and described how another one was publicly burned by the Parlement of Paris. He

42 “Il est vrai que je ne vous entretiens plus guère de nos affaires personnelles; quel est le traître qui en a d’autres aujourd’hui que celle de la nation ?” Mme Roland to Bosc, 26 juil 1789, Perroud, ed. Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793, 53.

43 “tout chagrin cesse, toute douleur est suspendue, toute affaire paticuliè re s’éteint.” Mme Roland to Bosc, 6 or 7 oct 1789, Ibid., 65. On her failure to set aside the personal, see, e.g., Mme Roland to Bosc, 25 aout 1789, Ibid., 58. In this letter, she explained that she regarded his recent silence not as “un tort que vous ayez, mais comme d’une privation que j’ éprouve.” The resumption of his correspondence, by contrast, “nous a fait le plus grand plaisir.”

44 Tackett also notices this in his study of the correspondences of five revolutionaries across the 1789 dividing line: see Timothy Tackett, “Paths to Revolution: The Old Regime Correspondence of Five Future Revolutionaries,” French Historical Studies 32, no. 4 (2009). Tackett focuses on Félix Faulcon, Gilbert Romme, Pierre Vergniaud, Nicolas Ruault and Adrien-Joseph Colson. These individuals, however, did not form a group comparable to that of the Roland circle, nor did they collectively enjoy the level of power and authority enjoyed at one point by the members of the circle.
devoted a paragraph to the “interrogation” of Doctor Guillotin by the same body. “We expect more next week,” he concluded, as though talking about the next installment of a serial novel. Roland, for his part, expressed frustration at his inability to get the most current political information from Paris: “At a time of rumor, troubles and change,” Roland complained to Bosc in May, 1789, “you must get interesting news every day, yet you don’t give me any…”45

News traveled in the other direction as well. The Rolands (as well as Lanthenas and Bancal, when in the provinces) offered the local news in their letters to their Paris correspondents. Brissot frequently printed extracts from these missives in his newspaper, the Patriote français.46 On August 12, 1789, for instance, Brissot printed a letter likely written by Mme Roland, which described a tense stand-off between a few noblemen and a popular mob supporting local magistrates in the Beaujolais. The following day, he printed a letter from Le Puy en Velay, Lanthenas’s hometown, which described the state of siege that prevailed in the region, then in the grip of the Great Fear.47 Two months later, he published a description of the state of public military preparedness in and around Clermont-Ferrand, lifted from a letter by Bancal.48


47 Le patriote français, 12 and 13 Aug 1789. For the attribution of this article to Mme Roland, see the previous note.

48 Patriote français, 19 Oct 1789.
These letters suggest that in the early days of the Revolution, the Roland circle had assumed something like the roles of newsletter writers for one another. It was of course well-established practice for correspondents to inform one another of their activities and to update one another on the latest local news. But there also existed in the period a class of professional newsletter writers, who for a fee provided regular and comprehensive accounts of the local news to paying correspondents. These writers and readers generally did not participate in the events they described. As late as the summer and early fall of 1789, the Roland circle was still using their letters in this mode, to convey news. At most, they would comment on the events their correspondents described.

This spectatorial quality of the Roland circle’s political engagement in these early days stands out in particularly stark relief against the engaged, dialogic quality of the scholarly correspondence that they maintained with one another. Writing to Bosc in the fall of 1788, at a moment of high political tension, Madame Roland made a point of asking about his scientific endeavors: “What are the sciences doing in the midst of our political convulsions and the agony of our finances? The scientists and the babblers? The collections and the classes? The

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50 For example, in a scatological letter to Lanthenas in mid-September, Roland commented extensively on the political news from Paris and made obscene jokes about aristocrats But he said almost nothing about the situation in Lyon. In a letter to Brissot later in the same month, Roland responded to his queries about taxation but again gave no indication that he was particularly involved in Lyon politics. See Roland to Lanthenas, 16 sept 1789, 446 AP 8, Papiers Brissot; and Roland to Brissot, 27 sept 1789, Ibid.
Blancherie and its business, and the museums? In February, 1789, as we have already seen, Roland wrote to Bosc asking for information about the production of whip handles. And a letter he wrote to Brissot that April similarly centered on scholarly pursuits: Roland commented on Brissot’s recently published study of America and gave him news of his encyclopedia. Only briefly did he allude to the revolution “brewing among us.” Nonetheless, the volume of Roland’s correspondence with academicians in 1787-1788 diminished significantly, compared with its volume in 1784-1785, hinting at the coming change.

The Paris-based members of the Roland circle were the first to become active participants, rather than spectators, in patriot politics. The spark that began their active involvement in politics, as it was for so many others, was the formation of the National Assembly in June and the taking of the Bastille in July, 1789. On July 13, 1789, Bancal was selected to serve as one of the members of Paris’s new “Permanent Committee.”


52 Roland to Bosc, 14 fev 1789, N.A.F. 6241.


54 In place of the 12-13 letters per year that he had written to academicians in the period 1784-1785, by 1787 he was down to 8 a year—most of which were shorter than the earlier missives. After 1788, he seems to have abandoned his correspondence with them entirely. See N.A.F. 22422, Part III.


living in Paris at the time, threw himself into the fray as well with great enthusiasm. On July 13th at around 5am, he wrote a breathless letter to Bancal, reporting on the armed men and the rumors of insurrection racing through his neighborhood. Four days later, on the 17th, he wrote again to tell Bancal that because of the enormous crowds, he had “not been able to reach City Hall, either yesterday or the day before, to see you.” He indicated that he had been trying to “do” something politically in his “district,” but finding that he could not make headway against more entrenched figures, he had decided to “run [around] the city and observe” instead. This decision to temporarily revert to being a revolutionary flâneur, after his failed first effort at practical politics, suggests the difficulty inherent in moving from the position of spectator to that of actor even for someone as well-placed as Lanthenas.

Patriots in the provinces, far from the centers of political activity at the court and in the Assembly, faced more limited options for actively engaging with events. One avenue was to become involved in politics on a local level, as the Rolands did beginning in the fall of 1789. (Unlike Lanthenas and Bancal, who went back and forth from Paris, the Rolands were based exclusively in the provinces at this point.) In November, Roland indicated to Bosc for the first time that he had plenty of things to do “here in this unhappy hole [the Lyonnais]:” comparing himself to an old-fashioned knight and to Hercules, he wrote that he had “…lances to shiver,

57 “Il vient de passer des gens qui paroissent avoir tous été battus la nuit … A moins de nouveaux malheurs, je serai au café conty a deux h…ou au rendez vous que vous me donnez hier;” “Voilà les sentiments qui sont dans mon cœur et qui je desire voir dans celui de tous françois.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 13 juil 1789, N.A.F. 9534.

58 “Je n’ai pu pénétrer, ni hier, ni avant hier, à la maison de ville, pour vous voir;” “…je n’ai rien pu faire dans mon district. … puisque je ne puis y faire aucun bien, j’ai preferé de courir la ville et d’observer.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 17 juil 1789, Ibid.
hydra heads to cut, monsters to defeat.” By early 1790, when Lanthenas came for a long visit, the Rolands had become deeply involved in the local patriots’ struggle against the Lyon municipal government, which had been held over from the Old Regime.

Another avenue to becoming a political actor, this time on a scale beyond the purely local, was to begin corresponding with other patriots not as a spectator but as an engaged partner. Letter-writing was an important part of how early modern people created themselves as subjects; more to the point, different kinds of letter-writing could help to foster specific kinds of subjecthood and subject positions. Writing letters as an observer put one in the position of an observer; writing as an actor positioned one as an actor. For the Rolands, the transition from the former to the latter finally happened in early 1790 under the spur of the so-called affaire Imbert. Echevin Imbert-Colomès, the head of the old Lyon city government, had been resisting calls from patriots to disband the old civic militia, dominated by conservative landowners and widely viewed as a tool of reaction. On February 7, a mob (aided if not incited by patriot leaders) forced Imbert to resign and flee from the city. This violence, coming just before the municipal elections, sparked an outcry against the patriots, which Imbert himself did everything in his power to enflame and prolong.

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59 “ici dans ce malheureux trou…de lances à briser, de têtes d’hydres à couper, de monstres à abattre.” Roland to Bosc, 15 nov 1789, N.A.F. 6241.

60 On the Lyon municipality, see Maurice Wahl, Les Premières années de la Révolution à Lyon (1788-1792) (Paris: Armand Colin, 1894), 101-123.

61 For a very useful discussion of the relationship between identity and letter writing in the early modern period, see Mario Biagioli, Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Ch. 1.

62 On the Imbert affair, see W. D. Edmonds, Jacobinism and the Revolt of Lyon, 1789-1793 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 47-51 and Wahl, Révolution à Lyon, Ch. 5.
The Rolands, who by early 1790 had become deeply involved in local patriot organizing, took it upon themselves to ensure that Brissot—by then a powerful journalistic voice—supported the Lyon patriots in the conflict. In so doing, the Rolands moved beyond their previous role as observers and became, in a sense, co-creators of his newspaper. In February, they pressed Brissot to report only their perspective on the conflict with Imbert, in spite of conflicting information that he was receiving from other Lyon patriots. In March, Roland urged him to not respond to Imbert’s charges against the patriots until he had had time to send him “the necessary instructions to do so.” Otherwise, as Mme Roland explained, Brissot ran the risk of appearing to be a mere “echo” of the local patriots, an appearance which would play directly into the hands of the counter-revolutionaries. Even Brissot himself seems to have felt that his newspaper was becoming, as he observed to Lanthenas, a kind of “correspondence” with his friends, a collaborative effort. Over the course of 1790, as we will see, their correspondence became increasingly self-possessed and they began to offer substantial constructive criticism when they felt it was necessary.


64 See Perroud, “Brissot et les Roland,” 413.

65 “Je n’ai qu’un moment et je me hâte de vous dire d’informer sur le champ M Bot de Wle de ne rien répondre à Imbert qu’il n’ait reçu les instructions nécessaires pour cela.” Roland to Lanthenas, 5 mar 1790, 446 AP 8, Papiers Brissot.

66 “…cela fortifierai les prétentions de ceux qui veulent qu’il soit notre echo…” Mme Roland to Lanthenas, 6 mars 1790, Ibid.

67 “vous m’avez dit, mon cher ami, que votre journal me serviroit de correspondance.” Lanthenas (Lyon) to Brissot, 24 janv 1790, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot.
The development of an equal, mutually engaged political epistolarity between the Rolands and Brissot in 1789 and 1790 suggests that correspondence itself could act as a catalyst for patriots to become revolutionaries. By assuming a participatory, active role in their correspondence, the Rolands—and perhaps other provincial patriots as well—took an important step towards construing themselves as engaged political actors. This was, of course, far from the only way that one could come to see oneself as a political subject: becoming politically active on the local level also offered a powerful way to redefine one’s political subject position. Yet for many French people, most of whom did not live in Paris, moving from a spectatorial to a participatory correspondence with friends in Paris offered perhaps the best chance to become engaged in the central political arena of the Revolution.

A scholarly network in the Revolution

As its members moved towards full, active participation in revolutionary politics, the Roland circle adapted its scholarly model to the new political circumstances, creating a novel, hybrid form of correspondence. Some aspects of the old model, including the overall size of the network, the physical form of the letters, and the way letters traveled, persisted almost unchanged. However, two key attributes of the circle’s pre-revolutionary epistolarity, its commitment to friendship and to scholarly dialogue, each underwent a significant transformation. The members of the circle rapidly began to politicize their epistolary friendships. Likewise, their shift to political subjects reshaped the dialogic exchanges to which they had long been committed. By 1790, the Roland circle had crafted a revolutionary correspondence that fused political content with the forms and habits of scholarly epistolarity.
The result was similar (though not identical) to the epistolary style of other French radical patriots, but quite distinct from that of their American and Dutch counterparts.

The Rolands and their circle began quite early on to politicize their epistolary friendships, just as they had once sought to fuse friendship and scholarly content in their letters. Thus Roland complained at the end of August, 1789, that neither of his “good friends” in Paris was writing to him. “How,” he asked Lanthenas and Bosc, “can you forget your friends, whom you ought to help take part in public affairs? It’s a crime both against friendship [un crime de lez amitié] and against the state [et de lez état].”68 Roland’s conflation of the duties of friendship and citizenship in this passage, while quite striking, was by no means unique.69 Mme Roland, in a letter a few days later, offered friendship as a carrot, rather than a stick, but to much the same purpose. “You really deserve a few words of friendship for your last letter, which made us very happy,” she wrote. “Take courage, always assemble yourselves. By coming together in the common interest, [you spread] bienveillance and ideas and [strengthen] the public spirit.”70 Epistolary friendship, in this iteration, encouraged correct political action.

Lanthenas, the youngest member of the circle, took the linkage between politics and epistolary friendship to its extreme. In a letter to Bancal about the political situation in Le Puy, Lanthenas expressed doubts about whether his cousin “and his wife, who is my relative,” were in

68 “bons amis;” “comment oublier des amis, qui l’on doit prendre tant de part à la chose publique ? C’est un crime de lez amitié, et à la fois de lez état.” Roland to Bosc, 23 aout 1789, N.A.F. 6241.

69 The language of fraternity was shared broadly by patriots and became particularly important to the Jacobins. See below, n.72.

70 “Vous méritez bien un petit mot de bonne amitié pour votre dernière lettre, qui nous a fait le plus grand plaisir. … À force de se réunir pour l’intérêt commun, la bienveillance s’étend, les idées se propagent et l’esprit public.” Mme Roland to Bosc, 25 aout 1789, Perroud, ed. Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793, 58.
fact “patriots.” His doubts emerged, apparently, from the way they corresponded with him: he
found that they would not “accustom themselves to the style of my letters and respond…with
frankness and courage.” “They only write me polite letters [que pour des complemens],” he
complained.71 His cousins’ inability or unwillingness to make their friendly correspondence
political, as Lanthenas thought necessary, made him wonder whether they were even patriots at
all.

The Rolands and their friends seem to have advanced only gradually from a concrete
sense that one should be friends with one’s political allies towards the more abstract notion,
usually ascribed to Jacobins, of the fraternity of all revolutionaries.72 A hint of the more abstract
concept appeared in Mme Roland’s first letter to Bancal when she asserted that “a friend of the
Revolution should not be a stranger to anyone else who loves this Revolution and who desires to
contribute to its complete success.”73 Yet she made this claim only in the context of trying to
make friends with Bancal, which suggests that the principle was not as abstract as it might seem
at first glance. Likewise, when Lanthenas hoped that Brissot would find support in “the esteem
and attachment [that] all the true friends of humanity” felt for him, he seems to have been

71 “mon cousin qui s’est retiré a la campagne et sa femme qui est ma parente n’ont pu encore
s’accoutumer au stile de mes lettres et à me repondre avec franchise et courage, s’ils sont
patriotes. Ils ne m’écrivent que pour des complemens.” Lanthenas to Bancal, [fragment of a
letter, “vers 1790”], N.A.F. 9534

72 On this notion, see Lynn Hunt, The Family Romance of the French Revolution (Berkeley:
University of California, 1992) and Mona Ozouf, “Fraternité” in François Furet and Mona
Ozouf, eds., Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française (Paris: Flammarion, 1988). For a
discussion that relates it productively to actual friendship, see Marisa Linton, “Fatal Friendships:

73 “Un ami de la révolution ne sauroit être étranger à aucun de ceux qui aiment cette révolution
et qui désirent contribuer à son plein success.” Mme Roland to Bancal, 22 juin 1790, Perroud,
ed. Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793, 97-98.
referring to actual patriots rather than a broader notion of universal fraternity.\textsuperscript{74} The Rolands and their circle, in short, remained committed even as late as 1791 to a notion of political friendship that closely resembled the very real scholarly community they had built in the old regime.

Discussion and dialogue also remained touchstones of the Roland network into the revolutionary period. Like American revolutionaries, who well after 1765 continued writing short, to-the-point letters, modeled on the mercantile correspondence in which they were trained, the Roland circle continued to expect and even demand a dialogic epistolarity. This persistence of scholarly forms is particularly apparent in the correspondence between Lanthenas and Bancal.\textsuperscript{75} The events of 1789, rather than disrupting their penchant for discussion via letter, seem only to have offered them more subjects to debate. In early 1790, for instance, Lanthenas began a letter to Bancal: “Yours gives me some other ideas to add to those which you have developed about finances and that you have addressed to our friend De Warville. I saw him yesterday and I left him this new letter.” Later in the letter, he commented on Bancal’s “reflections on the duties which bind each one to our fatherland [\textit{patrie}].”\textsuperscript{76}

Similar exchanges punctuated the extensive correspondence that Lanthenas maintained with Brissot. In one particularly striking instance, in September, 1790, Lanthenas and Bancal together wrote a letter to Brissot to complain about criticism he had made in his newspaper of the municipality of Lyon, then under patriot control. “We were extremely unhappy,” wrote

\textsuperscript{74} “…que l’estime et l’attachment de tous les amis sincères de l’humanité vous soutienne.” Lanthenas to Brissot, 5 janv 1791, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot.

\textsuperscript{75} They had probably known each other since 1787. See Perroud, ed. \textit{Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793}, II:736 (Appendice Q: Bancal)

\textsuperscript{76} “Vous m’y donnez quelques autre idées à ajouter à celle que vous aviez développé sur les finances et que vous avez adressée à notre ami Dlle. Je le vis hier soir et je lui ai laissé cette nouvelle lettre;” “réflexions sur les devoirs qui lient chacun à notre patrie.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 14 avr 1790, N.A.F. 9534.
Lanthenas, “about your praise for the district of Lyon [which was opposed to the municipality]… and as patriots and as friends, for the sake of the public good and for yourself, we think we must speak to you honestly [about it].” After Lanthenas had finished his defense of the municipality, Bancal took up the pen and expressed his own disappointment and his hope that Brissot would change his mind. Yet he was also careful to suggest that Brissot was not wrong to raise questions about patriots: the problem was, he wrote, that “you have started on a question which cannot really be decided until after the Constitution is finished.”

Discussion was good, Bancal suggested, even when he disagreed with it.

Debate could even take place within the confines of a single letter. In early 1791, Mme Roland wrote a long letter to Bancal, then living in London. She reported that German troops were massing near France’s eastern border and that the government could do nothing further to defend those regions against infiltration or even invasion by counter-revolutionary forces. “When I put all of these circumstances together with the rumor of priests and their accomplices, I think civil war is inevitable,” she wrote despairingly. After finishing, she gave the letter to Bosc to send, who added a note of his own disputing some of her statements. “What [Mme Roland] says is true,” he wrote, “but in my view the conclusions she draws are not. The political position of Prussia does not allow it to take the interests of our aristocrats as much to heart as the [counter-revolutionary] Prince-Bishops of the Rhine would like [us] to believe.” What’s more, Bosc viewed the political situation in France more optimistically than Mme Roland. “In spite of the obstacles…everything is going, everything is getting organized. … There will be no civil

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77 “Nous avons été extrêmement mécontent de l’éloge que vous avez fait du district de Lyon. … et pour la chose publique, comme pour vous même, en patriotes et en amis, nous croyons devoir pour parler avec une franchise qui vous prévunisse contre des personnes qui certainement, à tous égards, vous conduisent mal, sur ce qui regarde la ville de Lyon;” “vous avez tranché une question qui ne puisse être bien décidée qu’après la fin de la constitution.” Lanthenas and Bancal to Brissot, 28 sept 1790, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot.
The letter itself, as Bancal received it a few weeks later, thus offered multiple perspectives on a single issue: it was a self-contained dialogue in itself.

The beginning of Mme Roland’s epistolary relationship with Bancal offers perhaps the most vivid illustration of the importance of epistolary dialogue to the Roland circle and also offers a unique glimpse into the process by which that mode of interaction came into being. As mentioned above, although Bancal was a part of the Rolands’ circle through his friendships with Lanthenas and Brissot, he did not enter into direct communication with them until June, 1790. He and Mme Roland, with whom he corresponded first, did not have a long history of scholarly correspondence of the sort he had maintained with Lanthenas during the old regime. Instead, it had to be created. Her side of the correspondence survives almost in its entirety from the very beginning, which enables us to observe the emergence of a political dialogue—and in particular, Mme Roland’s conscious role in encouraging that mode of exchange.

The first few letters that Mme Roland exchanged with Bancal concerned themselves primarily with creating and solidifying their friendship. Mme Roland’s first letter, like the first letters of American revolutionaries we saw in an earlier chapter, concentrated on forming a connection by expressing what she imagined to be shared sentiments and referring to shared friends. In her very first letter, she expounded on the need, “since the French acquired a fatherland [patrie],” to create a “a new and powerful connection which brings [patriots] together

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78 “Lorsque je rapproche toutes ces circonstances de la rumeur des prêtres et de leurs suppôts, je crois la guerre civile inevitable;” “Ce que dit la ménagère est vrai, mais la conséquence qu’elle en tire ne l’est pas également à mes yeux. La position politique de l’Allemagne ne lui permet pas de prendre aussi à cœur l’intérêt de nos aristocrates que les Princes-Evêques des bords du Rhin voudraient le faire croire;” “malgré les obstacles des malveillans, tout marche, tout s’organise. … il n’y aura pas de guerre civile.” Mme Roland and Bosc to Bancal, 22 mars 1791, in Perroud, ed. *Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793*, 250-251.
in spite of the distances [among them] and unites them in a common cause.” A week later, in response to Bancal’s first letter to her, she observed that “revolutionary times” favor “rapid and lasting connections.” The letter began with an ecstatic response to the receipt of his first missive: “It is true,” she wrote, “that souls understand one another, that I exactly calculated the day [that] your first letter [would arrive].”

The need to forge a relationship notwithstanding, Mme Roland began by mid-July to incite Bancal to debate with her. A letter of July 21, 1790, offered a series of rapid-fire comments on politics and politicians—which practically begged for a critical response. But Bancal met her sharp comments not with debate, but with complaisance. She tried to explain it again to him in her next letter, in sending him a copy of a letter from a “patriot deputy:” “I thought it necessary to communicate it to you, because good citizens must know what one another’s views are; it is the means to know the truth, to better serve the fatherland [patrie].” A few weeks later, she complained that he was still too “favorable” to her opinions. “To give someone so much credence,” she complained, “is to oblige him to never be wrong, on pain of being tossed off the pedestal [rang] where you have placed him.” “So please,” she concluded,

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79 “depuis que les François ont acquis une patrie...;” “un lien puissant et nouveau qui les [patriotes] rapproche malgré les distances et les unit dans une même cause.” Mme Roland to Bancal, 22 juin 1790, Ibid., 97.

80 “Il est vrai que les âmes s’entendent, que j’avais parfaitement calculé le jour de votre première letter;” “les temps de revolution...liaisons rapides et durables.” Mme Roland to Bancal, 5e jour de l’an II de la Liberte, Ibid., 105-106.

81 See Mme Roland to Bancal, 21 juil 1790, Ibid., 110-113.

82 “une lettre d’un député patriote; j’ai pensé qu’il fallait vous la communiquer, parce que les bons citoyens doivent être au courant de leurs manières de voir réciproques ; c’est le moyen de bien connaître la vérité, de servir plus sûrement la patrie.” Mme Roland to Bancal, 25 juil 1790, Ibid., 121.
“criticize me sometimes, to give me a bit more confidence.”83 It would be difficult to imagine a more direct incitement to argument.

In the same August letter, Mme Roland also offered Bancal a model of the kind of rational exchange she sought to create. By mid-1790, as we have seen, she and her husband were both engaged in fairly frequent correspondence with Brissot. By the first months of 1790, their exchanges had achieved the critical, discursive spirit of their academic correspondence. In that context, she asked Bancal to pass a message if he saw Brissot: tell him that “I do not think my opinions are laws; that is it is for that reason that I offer them for discussion with so much confidence and because I am persuaded that his patriotism knows how to take a part [of it] in order to draw the truth more surely out into the light.”84 In other words, she expected Brissot to engage and critique her statements as a matter of course. Likewise, as she explained to Brissot himself, she regarded it as her “duty to make you know [the truth] when it seems to have escaped you.”85

By August, frustrated by her inability to get Bancal to write back to her critically, Mme Roland began to take a stronger tone in her letters to him. On August 11, she complained, exasperated, that he took “for infallible what I have presented as [merely] probable.” “By showing yourself so favorable [to me],” she went on, “you remind me of how much I have to be

83 “Témoigner à quelqu’un tant de créance, c’est l’obliger à ne se jamais tromper, sous peine d’être déchu du rang où on l’avait placé dans son opinion;” “Veuillez donc me critiquer quelquefois, pour me laisser plus de confiance.” Mme Roland to Bancal, 11 aout 1790, Ibid., 142.

84 “je ne crois pas que mes opinions soient des lois ; que c’est pour cela que je les livre à la discussion avec tant de confiance et parce que je suis persuadée que son patriotisme sait tirer parti de tout pour tirer la vérité plus sûrement au clair.” Mme Roland to Bancal, 11 aout 1790, Ibid., 143.

85 “un devoir de vous la [la vérité] faire connaître…lorsqu’elle paraît vous être échappée.” Mme Roland to Brissot, 23 juil 1790, Ibid., 113.
strict with myself.”86 When he replied, apparently miffed, she disavowed any desire or right to
tell him what to do. Nonetheless, she wrote, it was necessary that he discuss the available
political options with her. “What we ought to wish to do is not always obvious and, in [these]
difficult circumstances, all of the steps [taken by] good citizens are too important not to be
weighed with the minutest rigor.”87 For the sake of the greater good, she implied, Bancal had to
take part.

From this point forward, Mme Roland’s letters stop importuning Bancal and a critical
dialogue opened up between the two correspondents. Perhaps her plea for his help in “weighing”
the available political views and options finally convinced him to begin providing the dialogue
she demanded. Or it may be that he became convinced of her sincere desire to debate, and the
necessity of it, during his visit to the Rolands’ home during September of 1790. Whatever the
reason, by December, 1790, when he was in London, Mme Roland sent him regular letters filled
with political news and analysis and thanked him for the “infinitely interesting things about the
English government” he dispatched in return. Mme Roland’s letters make clear that Bancal
filled his replies not only with information about England but also with “comparisons” to French
politics that offered valuable lessons. Now at last, Mme Roland wrote to him a short while later,
they were corresponding with the “frankness that characterizes [friendship].”88

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86 “Vous preniez comme infaillible ce que j’avais présenté comme probable;” “En vous montrant
si favorable, vous me rappelez combien je dois user de rigeur avec moi-même.” Mme Roland to
Bancal, 11 aout 1790, Ibid., 143.

87 “Ce qu’on doit préférer de faire n’est pas toujours évident, et, dans les circonstances difficiles
où se trouve la patrie, toutes les démarches des bons citoyens sont trop importantes pour n’être
pas pesées avec la dernière rigueur.” Mme Roland to Bancal, 20 aout 1790, Ibid., 157.

88 “Vous nous mandez des choses infiniment intéressantes sur le gouvernement anglais…” Mme
Roland to Bancal, 30 dec 1790, Ibid., 208. “Cette franchise qui la caractérise. Mme Roland to
Conclusion

As Mme Roland’s months-long struggle to get Bancal to argue with her suggests, members of the Roland circle had strong feelings about the proper way to correspond. Or, to put it in other terms, they had strong views about how to be both a patriot and a letter-writer. These views emerged in good measure from the circle’s pre-revolutionary epistolary training and habits. During the old regime, the members of the Roland circle had been committed to a scholarly mode of correspondence. This model called for long letters, polite at first and then becoming friendly, but which engaged in a critical dialogue. It required, or at least strongly encouraged, the formation of friendships via letter.

These engrained epistolary habits were not easily abandoned in 1789, even once the Roland circle had shifted its attention decisively away from scholarly objects and moved into politics full-time. The durability of these habits should not surprise us. Like any kind of culture, epistolary culture rested on a set of shared and mostly unstated assumptions, which covered everything from the proper length of a letter to the right mode of carriage and the appropriate tone of an opening paragraph. For these conventions to change, everyone within the network had to be in agreement. Assuming, of course, that the participants were self-aware enough to take cognizance in the first place of the unwritten rules they obeyed. For that reason, epistolary habits sometimes survived even after the community and the society that had formed them were both long gone. The members of the Roland circle thus became revolutionaries in part with the help of an epistolary culture profoundly rooted in the old regime academies.

Some of what is usually considered to be novel about radical patriot or Jacobin epistolarity was in fact merely the old made new. The appetite that the members of the Roland
circle showed for forming friendships with other patriots certainly owed something to elevated, abstract notions of universal fraternity and patriot unity. Yet it was also, at least in part, rooted in the conventions of scholarly epistolarity, which saw scholar-friends as the highest form of correspondent. Similarly, the critical and dialogic tone of the Roland circle’s political letters owed as much to their training in scholarly epistolarity as it did to “revolutionary” notions about the free reign of reason. Even the way the Rolands became politically active, by engaging Brissot in a political dialogue, was shaped by their training as scholarly letter-writers: scholarly engagement provided a pattern for political engagement. Old regime practices and newfangled concepts both contributed to the distinctive epistolarity of the Roland circle and of the Jacobin network more broadly.

It follows, as we will see more fully in the next two chapters, that the Roland circle’s epistolarity shared some of the particular strengths and weaknesses of scholarly epistolarity as it existed in late old regime France.\(^89\) It was admirably open to discussion and debate. Yet this willingness to deliberate could, in times of crisis or emergency, become a liability rather than a virtue. Likewise, the linkage of political alliance and friendship could, in the right hands, provide great political strength. If the circle were too small, though, it could be politically limiting—or even dangerous, if there were a whiff of conspiracy in the air. As the next two chapters will argue, old regime epistolary habits shaped the successes and failures not only of the Roland circle but of the Jacobins more broadly.

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\(^{89}\) What I am discussing here is related to the concept of “affordances” used by scholars in media studies, for which see Lucas Graves, “The Affordances of Blogging: A Case Study in Culture and Technological Effects,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 2007 31(4): 331-346. My thanks to Will Slauter for pointing out this article to me.
Two pages of a six page letter. The slash marks on the bottom of the left page may be a mark left by Brissot as he printed an excerpt from the letter. Mme Roland ends and Lanthenas begins writing on the right hand page, about two thirds of the way down the page (indicated by arrow).

Like the Americans before them, the Rolands and their friends soon discovered how fragile patriot unity could be. Once the euphoria of summer 1789 had passed, divisions quickly started to appear within the patriot leadership’s ranks. The clash of personalities and a rush for political patronage—not to mention actual disagreements about politics—shattered the patriot elite’s unanimity. The King and his supporters did their best to encourage these divisions, hoping to slow if not reverse the progress of the Revolution. By the end of 1790, the patriot party was in a state of disarray, torn by disagreements and virtually unable to unite around common political projects. The divisions only grew deeper in the first half of 1791, as the King’s resistance to the Revolution became more overt, and finally burst into the open in July, 1791, after the King’s attempt to flee the country. For the Rolands and their allies, these were some of the darkest months of the Revolution.

This chapter examines how the Roland circle sought to rebuild a powerful and cohesive patriot party during this difficult period. I argue that the Roland circle’s epistolary habits played a crucial role in building and then holding together the fractious patriot parties in Lyon, Le Puy and eventually Paris itself. Shaped by the old regime academies but transformed into a political tool by the first months of the Revolution, the Roland circle’s private network proved to be an important asset not just for them personally but for the national patriot party as a whole. The chapter focuses on the ways in which the Roland circle collaborated with and shaped public patriot networks, particularly the network of the Jacobin clubs. It starts out with an account of
the Rolands’ political apprenticeship in the Lyon municipal government in early 1790, where they first applied their private network to the problem of maintaining patriot unity. After a brief discussion of the national Jacobin club network, the chapter uses the case of the Roland circle and the Lyon Jacobin club to demonstrate for the first time the crucial role that private correspondence played in constructing patriot clubs and connecting them to one another. The next section looks at how one member of the circle, Lanthenas, used his dialogic correspondence network to shape the political agenda of several provincial Jacobin clubs. Finally, the chapter shows how the Rolands and their private network, which had moved to Paris starting in early 1791, helped to save the national Jacobin network from a nearly fatal schism in mid-1791 after the King’s attempted flight from France.

The Rolands and their allies, like American patriot leaders two decades earlier, relied on private correspondence as a tool for political organizing. For both groups, the rules and etiquette of letter writing figured prominently in their political activities. But because the Roland group’s epistolary habits were so different from those of the American patriots, the kinds of public networks and political sociability that they helped to produce looked quite different from those that the Sons of Liberty had created. Almost from the beginning, the public Jacobin network, aided by the web of intimate, dialogic private correspondences among patriot leaders, engaged in tactical coordination and discussion. And when divisions in the patriot movement threatened to tear the Jacobin network apart, the Rolands and their allies could rely on the powerful bonds that their scholarly-style epistolary habits created to help them overcome them.

**Municipal revolutions and epistolarities**

Municipal politics in Lyon provided the Rolands and their circle with their first opportunity to turn a private correspondence network into a political tool. Roland was voted into
office in February, 1790, along with several other local patriot leaders, during the first free elections in Lyon.\(^1\) The new city government consisted of a mayor, a *procureur* (administrator) and his deputy, twenty “municipal officers” and forty-two “notables.” Day-to-day administration rested with the mayor, administrator and municipal officers; the notables only met in a limited number of cases and along with them formed the *conseil de la commune*. Because of divisions within the patriot electorate, especially divisions between poorer and wealthier voters, the most advanced patriot leaders only managed to gain spots as notables.\(^2\)

The patriot notables led by Roland set to work immediately to strengthen and unify the local patriot movement and to advance the agenda of national patriots in Lyon. Roland sought to convince the municipality to open its deliberations to the public, as Paris had done. He and his allies supported the National Assembly’s declaration of freedom of religion in April, combating conservative forces in the city who wanted to resist it. And they sought to ensure a reliable supply of bread and flour as a way of winning the poor (including many workers in Lyon’s massive silk industry) for the patriot party. Roland himself published a controversial pamphlet, *Municipalité de Lyon, aperçu des travaux à entreprendre et des moyens de les suivre*, that

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powerfully criticized the merchants and manufacturers who had long ruled Lyon and argued for a
more progressive tax code and efforts to improve the condition of workers.  

Just a few months after the patriot members of the city government took office, however,
a popular revolt against taxation put them in an uncomfortable position. Under the old regime,
one of the major sources of tax revenues for the city had been the octroi, a duty levied on goods
coming into the city. A corporation of tax farmers collected the funds using a system of barriers
and gates erected around the city limits. In early July, several members of the radical patriot
group in the municipal government, following the logic of the National Assembly’s decision to
abolish privilege and eager to show the poor that they were working to relieve them of the heavy
burden of taxes, bruited an eventual abolition of the octrois and other duties. When news of this
proposal reached the poorer quarters of town, large popular assemblies met and demanded that
the duties be abolished immediately. The municipality resisted, knowing such a move would
bankrupt the city, and wrote to the National Assembly for advice. But by the time the Assembly
responded, announcing that the taxes should continue to be collected, a crowd had already forced
the barriers and opened the gates. Two weeks later, when another crowd invaded City Hall, the
municipal government finally called in troops and National Guard units from neighboring towns
to restore order and reimpose the octroi barriers. 

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3 On his leadership, see Claude Perroud, ed. Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793 (Paris:
Imprimerie nationale, 1900-02), 2:724 and Wahl, Révolution à Lyon, 159-161, 164-168, 152-
155, 141. On the Travaux à entreprendre, see also Charles A. Le Guin, “Roland de la Platière:
A Public Servant in the Eighteenth Century,” Transactions of the American Philosophical
Society 56 (n.s.), no. 6 (1966).

4 Wahl, Révolution à Lyon, 177-192, esp. 177-186. Tax farming and the use of city barriers was
standard in old regime France: see Michael Kwass, Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in
Eighteenth-Century France: liberté, égalité, fiscalité (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
See also Municipality to Assemblée Nationale, 9 juil 1790, 1401 WP 032: Actes de
The popular revolt placed Roland and the other patriots in the Lyon city government in an untenable position with respect to both their local and their Paris allies. While aware of the need to relieve the tax burden on the poor and eager to retain the loyalty of the leaders of the Lyon popular party, they proved unwilling to give a public endorsement to extra-legal crowd action. On a local level, they feared that doing so would damage their credibility with wealthier local patriots and push them into the conservatives’ camp. Indeed, Roland himself was suspected of having personally fomented the tax revolt. On a national level, they knew that the local crowds faced serious criticism from Paris patriots for having acted in defiance of the National Assembly’s decrees. For patriot journalists and leaders in Paris, this amounted to counter-revolution. Brissot announced in his newspaper on July 19th that the “enemies of the constitution” had incited the people of Lyon as part of a plot to bankrupt the nation by cutting off its tax revenue. The patriots serving in the Lyon government found themselves caught in the middle of this multi-sided fight, which threatened to destroy the united front they had been working hard to create.

Roland himself took the lead in trying to smooth over the growing differences among the various patriot factions. On the local level, Roland adopted a double epistolary strategy intended to appease the two key constituencies within the Lyon patriot movement. In public, Roland restricted himself to disavowing any personal role in the crowd action against the tax barriers. He seems to have mounted a substantial public campaign to clear his name, but all that survives


6 Patriote français, 19 juil 1790, 2-3. For more on the reaction in Paris, see Wahl, Révolution à Lyon, 187-188.
is a short letter intended for publication that Roland sent to Luc-Antoine Champagneux, editor of the *Courrier de Lyon*, and a brief pamphlet to the same effect. Although both of these writings rejected any hint of involvement in the crowd actions, Roland refrained from offering any particular opinion on the rightness or wrongness of the crowd’s behavior. Instead, he defended himself on narrower grounds: he had left Lyon on July 7th, he pointed out, and so could not possibly have been directly implicated in the crowd’s activities. This public line disculpated Roland and the other notables from any blame in the eyes of the wealthier patriots while allowing Roland to avoid censuring the poorer patriots who had taken to the streets.

In private, however, Roland and Mme Roland came very close to endorsing the actions of the Lyon crowds. Roland, writing to Lanthenas a few days later, raged that he would go to court to clear his name of the “crimes” of which he had been accused: “I defy anyone to prove anything against me.” But he then noted that “of course! these are not, in my opinion, crimes.” This sentiment seems to have been common among radical patriots in Lyon, and Roland most likely made clear in his private correspondence with them that he did not think they had done wrong. Mme Roland echoed this view, suggesting in a letter that although the Lyonnais had been wrong to take the law into their own hands, their complaints about taxes were entirely justified. The blame for their decision to take down the barricades, she argued, lay with the

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7 On the campaign, see Roland (Villefranche) to Lanthenas, 26 juil 1790 (f. 166-67), N.A.F. 9532, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France, which quotes *in extenso* a letter that Roland received from a Lyon patriot. This strongly suggests that Roland had significant epistolary commerce with Lyon patriots even though almost none of the letters have survived. Roland, *Aux amis de la verité*, 28 juillet 1790.


9 “Je défie qu’on puisse me rien imputer;” “certes ! ce n’en sont pas, à mon avis, des crimes.” See Roland (Villefranche) to Lanthenas, 26 juil 1790 (f. 166-67), N.A.F. 9532.
conservative mayor and municipal officers, who had issued a series of confusing decrees just before the crowds took to the streets.\textsuperscript{10} The Rolands’ double strategy of private and public statements enabled them to smooth over differences among Lyon patriots while also disavowing any potentially damaging personal involvement in the case.

At the same time as he was working to ease the rifts within the patriot party in Lyon, Roland also took steps to defuse the anger towards Lyon in Paris. Since neither he nor his allies could publicly defend the Lyonnais crowds, he used private channels to try to get others to vindicate them. His strategy centered on getting the influential Brissot to revise his view of the revolt; once he changed his mind, Paris patriot opinion was likely to follow. Brissot’s criticism of the Lyonnais, he knew, derived from private letters and information that he had received. Indeed, this was obvious from the evolution of Brissot’s stance on the issue: he had first published a brief account of the revolt, based on the Lyon municipality’s public letter to the National Assembly and an issue of the \textit{Courrier de Lyon}, which largely excused the conduct of the crowd.\textsuperscript{11} Only later, after having apparently heard other, private accounts, did Brissot change his mind and start to direct his harshest criticism at the Lyon crowds themselves. Roland identified these sources to his friend Bosc as “some fisco-municipal agents,” one of whom was

\textsuperscript{10} Mme Roland to Brissot, 23 juillet 1790, Perroud, ed. \textit{Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793}, 2:115-117.

\textsuperscript{11} According to the municipality, the people “n’est qu’égare il n’est pas aussi coupable qu’il peu le paroit.” Municipality to AN, 12 juil 1790, 1401 WP 032, Archives municipales de Lyon, Lyon. See also Municipality to Deputes, 12 juil 1790, Ibid., which makes a similar point. For reference to the issue of the \textit{Courrier de Lyon}, see \textit{Patriote français}, 15 juil 1790, 2.
the brother of a deputy in the National Assembly, and Pierre-Charles Blot, Brissot’s childhood friend in Lyon and a former ally of the Rolands.12

To counter these secret whisperings and change Brissot’s mind, the Rolands adopted a threefold strategy. First, they offered an alternate account of the facts of the tax revolt, stressing the culpability of the conservative-dominated municipality. This involved little risk: they simply reiterated what they had already been saying publicly in Lyon. Second, they tried to discredit Brissot’s informants, especially Blot. This was a far trickier and risky proposition. As they well knew, Brissot trusted his old friend—the two even used the familiar tu with each another, a sign of considerably intimacy13—and any attempt to break the confidence between them might cause Brissot to lose faith in them instead. The Rolands decided that the best strategy would be for Mme Roland to write at length to Brissot and lay out the case against Blot: as a woman letter-writer, she would be partly insulated from charges of self-serving hostility to a political rival.14

Mme Roland’s letter to Brissot deployed the dialogic, discursive norms of scholarly correspondence in order to turn him politically against Blot. Her opening sentence established an almost scientific tone: “I believe you, Sir, to be so worthy of the truth…that I regard it as a duty to make it known to you, or put you on the path to finding it, when it appears to have escaped you.” For several pages, she recited the events of the tax revolt and analyzed its causes before finally coming to Blot himself. She firmly explained how Brissot’s friend had acted

12 “la relation fausse de quelques agens fisco-municipaux, dont l’un, frère d’un député à l’assemb natle;” “Blot, qui avait le plus déclaimé contre ces gens là, est leur agent aujourd’hui.” Roland to Bosc, 24 juil 1790, N.A.F. 6241.

13 Blot (Lyon) to Brissot, 18 nov 1791, 446 AP 12, Papiers Brissot de Warville, Archives Nationales, Paris, France.

14 For more on the qualities attributed to the female letter-writer, which made it easier for her to offer certain kinds of criticism, see Dena Goodman, Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), Ch. 4.
against the Revolution, though she delicately suggested that he had been “led into error” not by
cupidity or bad principles but by his excessive “need…to not displease anyone”—even
aristocrats. She also hastened to add that neither she nor her husband was perfect, forestalling
the objection that she was demanding more from him than from herself. By way of conclusion,
she described her letter as both a “search…for the truth” and as a “sign of the true and
inalterable” friendship they had for Brissot, a common strategy (as we have seen) in scholarly
epistololarity during the old regime.\textsuperscript{15}

As a third part of the Rolands’ strategy, they encouraged their mutual friends to appeal to
Brissot directly. This, too, was more complex than it might seem at first glance, since they
wanted these interventions to seem spontaneous rather than orchestrated. A “spontaneous”
intervention would not only heighten the effect but also, by hiding the Rolands’ involvement,
prevent rumors of a break between Blot and the Rolands from further dividing the already
disunited Lyon patriots.\textsuperscript{16} To secretly plan the appeal, Roland relied on the high level of trust
among the core correspondents of the circle. Having sent Mme Roland’s letter and several
others to Bosc, Roland provided detailed instructions in the covering letter about what to do with
them. He urged Bosc to read all the letters, to learn “about our sufferings,” and then pass them to
Lanthenas and convince him to talk to Brissot about Blot. He was then to give the enclosed

\textsuperscript{15} “Je vous crois, Monsieur, tellement digne de la vérité par vos principes et votre caractère que
je regarde comme un devoir de vous la faire connaître ou de vous mettre sur la voie de la
chercher, lorsqu’elle paraît vous être échappée;” “besoin de son cœur de ne déplaire à personne,
qui dirige et modifie ses actions;” Mme Roland to Brissot, 23 juil 1790, Perroud, ed. \textit{Lettres de
madame Roland: 1780-1793}, 2:114, 118, 120.

\textsuperscript{16} “faute d’entente dans les patriotes.” Roland to Bosc, 23 juin 1790 “Lettres inédites de Roland
letters to Brissot, without the cover letter (which, of course, contained the instructions). That one was to remain secret: “above all,” he admonished Bosc, “do not ever let go of my letter.”

The Rolands’ epistolary stratagems proved successful. Mme Roland’s letter convinced Brissot that Blot was not to be trusted, at least not as a reliable reporter of political news from Lyon, and from the end of July, Brissot stopped including information from him in the *Patriote français*, though they remained good friends. More remarkable, her carefully framed criticisms of Blot seem to have brought Brissot closer to the Rolands rather than pushed him away. This closeness was a crucial ingredient in their developing political prominence in later 1790 and early 1791. From the Rolands’ point of view, however, the most important point was that they accomplished their goals without causing any further scandal in Lyon patriot circles. With Bosc and Lanthenas in their confidence, and playing their part secretly, the Rolands were able to neutralize Blot as a political force in patriot politics without ever having to confront him openly.

Interestingly, shortly after the Rolands’ success in the *affaire Blot*, a somewhat similar situation arose in Le Puy in which Brissot also played a central role. There too, the conflict involved two groups in the patriot party. A member of the local Jacobin club, one Alphone Aulagnier, had offended the town’s bishop, earning him the opprobrium of the patriot mayor and a roughing-up from the local National Guards. Fearing for his safety, Aulagnier wrote an account of the events by private letter to his friend Lanthenas. Lanthenas passed the letter to

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17 “Causez en avec Lanthenas, qu’il en parle à Brissot;” “surtout cela…ne vous désaisissez jamais de ma lettre.” “Les lettre ci jointes m’ont pris plus de temps que je n’avoit compté. Lisez les. Vous apprendrez encore des choses sur nos misères. Puis, faites passer le tout à M. Dew.” Roland to [Bosc], 24 juil 1790, N.A.F. 6241. For Lanthenas seeing the letters, see Roland (Villefranche) to Lanthenas, 26 juil 1790, N.A.F. 9532.

18 Brissot refused to criticize Blot in his letters with members of the Roland circle, even in response to their criticisms. See the last paragraph of Lanthenas (Lyon) to Brissot, 15 sept 1790, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot, AN and Brissot to Lanthenas, 18 sept 1790, N.A.F. 9534.
Brissot, who printed a scathing article, accusing the Le Puy municipality and Guards of counter-revolutionary tendencies. Horrified by this portrayal, the municipality and Guards spent months trying to get Brissot to rescind the article—eventually sending the mayor himself to Paris to try to talk reason to the powerful patriot editor. Yet in this case, as in the Lyon affair, private communication trumped public authority: Brissot, confident in the reliability of his circle of correspondents, refused even to meet with the mayor who had come all the way to Paris to see him.\(^\text{19}\)

Although both of these affairs had mostly local consequences, they also proved pivotal in the Roland circle’s political development. Within a few months of the Lyon tax revolt, which had revealed the weakness of the local patriot party, the Rolands and their friends took it upon themselves to form a new and more powerful patriot club in the city. They also began to understand more clearly the importance of Paris to provincial patriot politics. “You have been informing me for some time,” wrote Roland to Bosc in early August, “that the provinces needed to stand firm. I tell you now that it is Paris that must act. Otherwise, all is lost.”\(^\text{20}\) This recognition of the important role that Parisian events played in provincial patriot politics would shape their efforts over the coming months to build up the national Jacobin network.

**The Jacobin network: functioning, strengths and weaknesses**


\(^{20}\) “Vous me mandiez il y a quelque tems que c’était aux provinces à tenir ferme. Je vous dis maintenant que c’est à Paris à agir. Sans quoi tout est perdu.” Roland to [Bosc], 3 aout 1790, N.A.F. 6241.
By the time the Roland circle began to become involved in it, the Jacobin club network was already the arm of a powerful national organization. The original Jacobin club grew out of informal meetings organized by representatives from the province of Brittany to the Estates General in early 1789. The club quickly became the meeting place for patriot deputies and it retained that role after the National Assembly constituted itself in July, 1789. After moving to Paris in the fall, where it took up quarters at a Jacobin (Dominican) convent, the club began to attract requests for affiliations from similar clubs in towns across France. By the fall of 1790, the Jacobins counted over 150 affiliated clubs and had over 1000 members in Paris alone. Before turning to the Roland circle’s role in founding and directing patriot clubs, it is necessary to pause and analyze the nature of political communication in the Jacobin club network. The national network of clubs connected by regular correspondence was one of the major political strengths of the Jacobin Club and “played a very important role in activating political commitment” across the country. Yet surprisingly little is known about how this network worked to create reliable political information and connection, and what its limits were as an instrument of political action. This section summarizes the state of knowledge about how the

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23 There is no systematic survey of the subject. Michael Kennedy provides only the barest outlines of the actual working of the network: see Kennedy, *First Years*, 35-36. The same is true of Crane Brinton’s classic study: see Brinton, *Jacobins*, 35-36. Most of the work on how the Jacobin network actually functioned has been done by scholars working on the provinces; see the works cited below.
Jacobin club network produced and consumed letters and shows how the clubs’ epistolary practice helped make letters reliable, trustworthy, and thus useful to patriots. At the same time, it explores the limitations that some of these same practices placed on Jacobin organizing—many of which were mirror images of the strengths of the Rolands’ private correspondence network described in the previous chapter.

Correspondence was the oxygen that patriot clubs respired. Almost as soon as a club formed, it began to write and receive letters. In most cases, the clubs formed a special comité de correspondance (corresponding committee). This might range in size from one or two individuals, as was common in the smallest local clubs, to over twenty, as the Paris Jacobins had. The clubs chose these individuals in various ways, from formal election to appointment. All, however, especially in the smaller societies, were likely to come from among the ranks of the more well-off and socially prominent members of the club.

The corresponding committee was charged with receiving the club’s mail, responding to everyday matters itself and bringing other letters to the full club’s attention. Important incoming letters were often read aloud and discussed at a general club meeting. If appropriate, the club would then commission the corresponding committee to draft a response, which would be read

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27 This was true of the club leadership generally: see Kennedy, *First Years*, 74-77.
aloud to the club before being sent off. Although in principle this offered an opportunity for the membership to vote for or against sending the letter, club records rarely indicate such a vote. Rather, it seems, the public reading served as a form of transparency: it let the members know what their club was saying and ensured that the member(s) charged with drafting the correspondence had accurately conveyed the club’s sentiments.28

The drafting procedures upon which the clubs insisted helped to give their letters much-needed reliability. Because recipients knew that the letters they received were read aloud before being sent, they could feel confident that they faithfully reflected the sending club’s political views. At the same time, the club membership’s participation in the correspondence process helped to validate the clubs’ claim to represent “public opinion.”29 Although the club “public” did not participate in the actual drafting of the letters, they did help to choose which ones would get a response and they could in principle offer feedback on the drafts. The “publication” of

28 For example of these behaviors, see Aulard, Recueil, 1:287 and 283n1 and Kennedy, Marseilles, 46.

correspondence in the clubs thus made it more plausible to see the club’s letters expressing a wider group’s opinions.

The “public” nature of the drafting process had significant downsides as well, however. For one thing, it left little room for nuance, self-doubt or self-examination. Scholars have long noted the strident or (more generously) self-assured tone of Jacobin correspondence and rhetoric in general.30 The Paris Jacobins’s letter, for instance, are full of language such as that in a 1790 letter to the club of Brest: “If the enemies [of the nation] would only show themselves openly, we do not doubt that they would soon be dispersed.”31 While this language may reflect, to some extent, the Jacobins’ real self-assurance, we should bear in mind—at least when it comes to letters read aloud in clubs—that these epistles were performances as well, constrained by the rules of public rhetorical art. Even if a club wanted to convey doubt, skepticism or real fear, it could not very well do it in one of these public letters: the form did not allow it. The senders, moreover, knew that the recipient club would in all likelihood read their correspondence aloud at their meetings. This knowledge also undoubtedly constrained both the style and content of the letters. It would not do, after all, to express doubts or fears, which could well be read as signs of the dispatching club’s political weakness or heterodoxy. And given that many clubs allowed


31 Letter of 22 Sept 1790 in Aulard, *Recueil*, 1:287. Similarly, the club of Brioude (Haute-Loire) confidently assured the Société populaire of Puy “in advance” that “the town of Brioude et all those which adjoin it will accept [the Constitution] with joy and alacrity.” (“d’avance;” “la ville de Brioude et tout ce qui l’avoisine l’acceptera [the Constitution] avec joye et emprassement”) Brioude to Le Puy, 23 juil 1793, 3 J 9: Lettres adressées par les sociétés populaires du département (1792-an II), Archives départementales de la Haute-Loire, Le Puy-en-Velay. Note that in this and other citations, I have left the orthography as in the original (including using accents only where they exist in the original). For another observation about the ways that drafting procedures limited some clubs’ reach, see Michael L. Kennedy, “The Best and the Worst of Times: The Jacobin Club Network from October 1791 to June 2, 1793,” *Journal of Modern History* 56, no. 4 (Dec., 1984): 637-638.
anyone to attend meetings, it would be unwise to include sensitive information or any information of uncertain authenticity or truthfulness.

After the club had given its agreement, the committee would send out the correspondence. Committees usually did something to safeguard the integrity of the correspondence, for instance writing it on stationary or closing it with an official club seal. Less frequently, the committee would print the dispatches. Practically speaking, printing was significant because it made an epistle immune to tampering and thus virtually self-authenticating. More subtly, by making club correspondence optically equivalent to public media such as books, newspapers and pamphlets, printing placed it more fully into the public sphere.

The letter, whether printed or manuscript, eventually reached another club and was received by that club’s corresponding committee. In evaluating its importance, the receiving club considered not only its authenticity and its content but also its provenance. There was a clear hierarchy within the network. The central node, the Paris club, had both the most complete set of connections and the most credibility; regional hubs, such as the Marseille, Bordeaux and Lyon clubs, had a strong web of national connections and substantial although lesser credibility; least connected and therefore least likely to be known and trusted were the smaller, local clubs.

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32 See Délibérations of the Société des Amis de la Constitution de Lyon (Section de la Croix-Rousse), 29 juin 1791, 34 L 3, Archives départementales du Rhône, Lyon, France; and Kennedy, First Years, 44-45.

33 See Ibid., 38.


35 For the hierarchy of clubs, see the special issue on “Sociétés populaires,” Annales historiques de la Révolution française 266 (1986). However, exceptions did exist to this rule. See Peyrard, Jacobins de l’Ouest, 50-51, which argues that some clubs created a “conception nationale de l’espace politique” through their correspondence.
This hierarchy of connection and trust could prove extremely useful. When clubs were inundated with information or faced with competing arguments, for instance, club reputations served as an easy way to begin winnowing the wheat from the chaff.\textsuperscript{36}

But the hierarchy in the network could also prove to be a significant liability. New clubs, which had not yet developed a reputation, found it difficult to enter and begin to use the network. Indeed, the Paris Jacobins implicitly recognized this problem when they required that any new club demanding its affiliation have the support of either a deputy of the National Assembly or of two already-affiliated societies: they required, in other words, the imprimatur of a known intermediate to accept a newly-formed club.\textsuperscript{37} Even more serious, the network’s reliance on reputation made it ill-suited to cope with any crisis that arose from political splits among the clubs themselves. In such moments, which occurred repeatedly from 1790 through 1793, clubs’ reputations could no longer be relied upon as a clear indication of their current political reliability. In fact, at times like that, the power of reputation and connectedness often allowed a powerful regional club to take many local clubs with it in opposition to the Paris Jacobins—as happened, for example, during the Federalist movement.\textsuperscript{38}

The official Jacobin network, in sum, had both great strengths and significant weaknesses as an instrument for patriot organizing. Practices of transparency and collective production lent

\textsuperscript{36} The most vivid illustration of this point is the great deference of clubs to communications from the Paris Jacobins, for which see Louis de Cardenal, \textit{La province pendant la Révolution: histoire des clubs Jacobins (1789-1795)} (Paris: Payot, 1929), 403.


credibility and reliability to clubs’ correspondence. Indeed, at its best, the clubs’ epistolary practice invested their letters with the authority of public opinion. Yet those same practices placed tight limits on the content, form and even efficiency of clubs’ correspondence: official letters were strident, often politically anodyne, and took considerable time to produce. Private correspondence, as we will see, offered another avenue for political organizing, one which both supplemented and collaborated with the official Jacobin network.

1790: Creating patriot societies

The imbrication of private correspondence with public Jacobin epistolarity began with the formation of the clubs themselves. In the fall of 1790, frustrated by conservative dominance in the Lyon municipality and the inactivity of the small existing patriot society, the Club du Concert, the Roland circle took it upon itself to form a new, more radical patriot society in the city.39 Henri Bancal, who had come from Paris for an extended visit to Lyon, apparently took the lead on this project. The club he helped formed was modeled on the far-left Cordeliers club in Paris and borrowed its distinctive federative structure: small clubs, called Sociétés populaires, met in each section (city district) and sent delegates to a general coordinating body, called the Club Central.40

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39 On the situation in Lyon, see Wahl, *Révolution à Lyon*, Chs. II and III, esp. 137-138. NB: in the full version of this chapter, I use previously untapped evidence in the papers of J.P. Brissot (Archives Nationales, Paris) to give the first account of the formation of the club by the Roland circle. Historians have until now believed that the Rolands were not involved: see W. D. Edmonds, *Jacobinism and the Revolt of Lyon, 1789-1793* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 71.

40 See Bancal to Brissot, 24 Sept 1790, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot, Archives Nationales, Paris, France. Like the section clubs of Paris, the Lyon Sociétés populaires were open to men of all socio-economic condition.
The new club was an immediate success: almost from its first meeting, it had as many members as the much older Club du Concert. For the new club to fulfill its promise as a new center for patriot activity in the Lyonnais, however, it needed to gain an affiliation with the Paris Jacobin club. The Jacobins’ imprimatur would lend the club much-needed credibility and provide it with a steady stream of information from Paris. But two obstacles stood in the way of the affiliation. First, the Club Central was new and entirely unknown to the Jacobins. Second, even if it were better known, the Jacobins had already accepted the Club du Concert as an affiliate. Since the Jacobins only affiliated one club per town, gaining an affiliation for the Club Central meant displacing the Club du Concert from the Jacobin network.

To help the Sociétés populaires gain a Jacobin affiliation, the Roland circle turned to their friend and collaborator, the journalist Jacques-Pierre Brissot. Since early 1790, the members of the circle had been corresponding with him about his newspaper, the *Patriote français*, which was widely read in Lyon and had a reputation for “impartiality.” The circle sought to shape Brissot’s coverage of local issues and policies by sending him articles and pieces of letters to publish and by making sure that he did not publish items that reflected poorly on them or their allies. Indeed, they placed so many items into the *Patriote français* that Brissot quipped that

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41 See Bancal to Brissot, 24 Sept 1790, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot; and Edmonds, *Jacobinism*, 71.

42 “…il faut reserver l’autorité de son impartialité pour les bonnes occasions.” Mme Roland to Lanthenas, 6 mars 1790, 446 AP 8, Papiers Brissot.

43 Sometimes they sought only to prevent publication: “I only have a moment,” Roland wrote to Lanthenas at the beginning of March, “and I hasten to tell you to inform M. Brissot de Warville to not respond to Imbert[-Colomès, a disgraced Lyon political figure] until he has received the necessary instructions for doing so.” (“Je n’ai qu’un moment et je me hâte de vous dire d’informer sur le champ M Bot de Wle de ne rien répondre à Imbert qu’il n’ait reçu les instructions nécessaires pour cela.”) Roland to Lanthenas, 5 mar 1790, 446 AP 8, Papiers Brissot. At other times, they complained that their work was not getting published: Roland complained that the letters and articles he sent Brissot “often come to nothing” (“elles n’aboutissoient souvent à rien”) Roland to Lanthenas, n.d. [late 1789, early 1790], Ibid.
the newspaper could “serve as [his] correspondence” with the Roland circle in Lyon. What he chose to publish and the commentary that he offered on it in print, he suggested, created a kind of epistolary dialogue with the circle in Lyon, half in manuscript and half printed.  

In the letter to Brissot in which he announced the creation of the Sociétés populaires, Bancal confronted head-on both of the obstacles that stood in the way of getting them a Jacobin affiliation. Knowing that “the Jacobins of Paris don’t affiliate with two societies in the same town,” Bancal explained, he had advised the Sociétés populaires to present themselves “first to the one established under the name Amis de la Constitution [i.e., the Club du Concert], so that they will regard them as belonging to themselves.” Then, he thought, the Sociétés could approach the Paris Jacobins for an affiliation as a sub-entity of the Club du Concert. He asked Brissot to “vouch for the Société when it requests its affiliation.” Bancal knew this plan was effectively an end run around the Jacobin club’s rules prohibiting multiple affiliates in one city. But he hoped that Brissot, who was well known in the Paris circles of radical patriotes and a frequent presence at the Jacobins, would have sufficient clout to gain their support.

In the safety of his private letter, Bancal also offered Brissot ammunition to support the Sociétés populaires’ petition. “I have to tell you,” he wrote, “that the society that already exists

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44 For examples of the circle’s successful placement of articles in the Patriote français, see Claude Perroud, “Brisson et les Roland,” La Révolution française 34(May 1898). “…vous m’avez dit, mon cher ami, que votre journal me serviroit de correspondance.” Lanthenas (Lyon) to Brissot, 24 janv 1790, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot.

45 “Je sais que les Jacobins de Paris n’affilient point 2 sociétés dans la même ville, et j’ai conseillé a les patriotes de se presenter d’abord ici a celle deja etablie sous le titre d’amis de la constitution afin qu’ils les regardent comme tenant a la leur…;” “Je vous en préviens afin que vous en fassiez connoitre la société lorsqu’elle demandera son affiliation.” Bancal to Brissot, 24 Sept 1790, Ibid.

here [Club du Concert] is very small and counts just one or two really warm patriotes. So it is quite important that the project of patriotic clubs in the sections succeed.”47 This information directly contradicted the Sociétés’ public stance towards the Club du Concert and so could not be a part of any official communication from the Sociétés to the Paris Jacobins. Yet Bancal knew that this information, used correctly, might actually help them gain an affiliation. If the Jacobins knew how small and ineffectual the Club du Concert was, they were much more likely to bend their rules and find a way to incorporate the stauncher patriots of the Sociétés into their network. Bancal could count on Brissot, his trusted correspondent, to make the best possible use of this information and to make sure that it did not get back to the Club du Concert.

With the support of Brissot and other friends of the Roland circle, the Sociétés populaires received quite a favorable hearing at the Jacobin club. In January, the Jacobins dispatched letters “to the Sociétés populaires…in order to bring them to an arrangement with the Society of St. Clair [another name for the Club du Concert].” Specifically, the Jacobins wanted members of the Club du Concert to physically join with the Sociétés. Privately, Lanthenas worried that this “might not be the best [idea].”48 Even so, the Sociétés were apparently considerably more willing to try this experiment than was the Club du Concert. In early February, Mme Roland fiercely mocked the Club’s resistance to fusing with the Sociétés: “Poor things! when one finds

47 “…je dois vous dire que la société deja formée a Lyon est tres peu nombreuse, et qu’on n’y compte guère qu’un ou deux patriotes bien chauds. Il est donc bien important que le projet des clubs patriotiques dans la sections réussissent.” Bancal to Brissot, 24 Sept 1790, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot. This judgment was based on both his own judgment and the repeated criticisms voiced by Mme Roland, in particular, in her correspondence with Lanthenas and Bancal throughout 1790: see Perroud, ed. Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793, 81-138.

48 “le lundi 17 ct devoient partir les lettres de la soc. des Jacobins aux sociétés populaires d’ici pour les porter à un arrangement avec la soc. de st Clair. Je crains que ce ne soit pas le mieux que l’on propose.” Mme Roland & Lanthenas to Brissot, 19 janv 1791, 446 AP 8, Papiers Brissot.
at the bottom of the bag [au fond du sac] merchants united by their commercial interests and regarding it as disreputable to spread out in their sections among the people, whom they mistrust and oppress.”

For the next few months, the Club du Concert and the Sociétés populaires continued in an uneasy coexistence. The two camps negotiated to find a workable way to fuse their memberships. Some patriots, including members of the Roland circle, continued to attend the Club du Concert as well as the section clubs and the Club Central. Lanthenas even used his private correspondence to pass “packets” for the Club du Concert even as he extolled the virtues of the Club Central. Yet with the Roland circle’s support, the Sociétés populaires quickly became the senior partner in the relationship. By April, 1791, the Club Central counted somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 total members—as against 225 in the Club du Concert. And its political influence grew accordingly: in the December, 1790, elections, the Club Central’s efforts were instrumental in bringing a number of patriots into municipal office and electing a patriot mayor, Louis Vitet.

Perhaps spurred by their success in Lyon, the members of the group, especially Lanthenas, tried to extend the model of Sociétés populaires to other locales as well. “Let us form clubs populaires everywhere,” Lanthenas wrote to Brissot in early January, 1791, “and we will

49 “Quelle pitié ! quand on trouve au fond du sac des marchands rapprochés pour leurs intérêts de commerce, et regardant comme une chose infamante de se répandre dans leurs sections parmi le peuple qu’ils méprisent et qu’ils oppriment.” Mme Roland to Brissot, 7 fév 1791, Ibid.

50 See Deliberations of the Societe des Amis de la Constitution de Lyon (Section de la Croix-Rousse), 29 juin 1791: “L’assemblée deliberant sur l’article 2e du projet de reunion de la societé [sic] populaire avec celle seante au concert, desire que tous citoyens de l’une des deux societees puisse etre recu dans lautre.” AD Rhone, 34 L 3.

51 See, e.g., Lanthenas (au Clos laplatiere) to Brissot, 27 oct 1790, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot.

52 See Edmonds, Jacobinism, 71, 65, 87-89.
be victorious.”53 A week later, Lanthenas was taking practical action: he wrote to ask the Jacobins to “invite all of their affiliated societies to incite [à provoquer] societies uniting all of the citizens in little groups in the places where they are established.”54 Although there is no indication that this request was successful, at least in the short term, it was certainly a clever move by Lanthenas. The Jacobin network’s imprimatur, he knew, would go far towards persuading its affiliates to adopt the new club structure.

Lanthenas simultaneously made direct use of his private connections to forward his plan. He told Bancal that he was “pressing” the club in Le Puy to form sociétés populaires. Le Puy was his hometown and his political base and he was friends with some of the leading members of the local club there; he could expect them to take his request seriously.55 He then asked Bancal to write to contacts in his own hometown, Clermont-Ferrand, to “support these ideas, which you can easily develop and extend.”56 While there is no evidence that Lanthenas succeeded in this effort either, it is clear enough what he thought was the best way to pursue his goals: with both

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53 “Formons partout des clubs populaires et nous triomferons.” Lanthenas to Brissot, 5 janv 1791, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot.

54 “J’ai écrit aussi aux Jacobins pour leur proposer un arête qui est d’inviter toutes leurs societes affiliees a provoquer dans les lieux ou elles sont etablies des societes reunissent en petites masses tous les citoyens.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 10 janv 1791 in Henriette Bancal-Des-Issarts, Lettres autographes de Mme Roland, adresées à Bancal-des-Issarts, membre de la Convention, ed. Sainte-Beuve (Paris: Eugène Renduel, 1835), 147.

55 For more on Lanthenas’s roots in Le Puy and his continuing connections there, see Ch. 6.

56 “Si vous écrivés à Clermont vous ferez bien d’appuyer sur ces idées que vous développerez et étendrez aisément. Je presse la société du Puy de faire de même: il faut que l’exemple du voisinage l’entraîne.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 10 janv 1791 in Bancal-Des-Issarts, Lettres autographes, 148.
clubs, Lanthenas followed the path of greatest trust and credibility within the network to get his proposal a hearing.57

François Lanthenas’s struggle for younger sons

Around the same time that the Roland circle was working to form patriot clubs in Lyon and nearby cities, they became involved in a more national project, a reform of French family law. They became particularly deeply enmeshed in the struggle to change French inheritance law in favor of younger sons. This effort, one of Lanthenas’s major projects in 1790 and 1791, further demonstrates the interdependence of the public and private networks. It shows how discussion, a mainstay of the Roland network’s epistolary practice, helped to shape the members’ political projects. Most of all, Lanthenas’s repeated efforts to gain the clubs’ support for reforming inheritance law show powerfully how the members of the Roland network sought to use the authority and credibility of the club movement to advance the political positions that they had collectively decided to pursue.

Reforming family law was an old Enlightenment project, which had gained Lanthenas’s attention in the mid-1780s.58 With the exception of areas in the North that enforced equal inheritance, most French families under the old regime lived with either de facto or de jure primogeniture.59 This had been criticized well before the Revolution: Diderot and d’Alembert’s

57 On possible reason that Lanthenas’s project did not succeed is that it was superfluous. The Puy club, at least, was already a société populaire in the sense that it admitted the poor as well as the rich. See Règlement à l’usage de la Société des Amis de la Constitution, Séance au Puy, Chef-lieu du Département de la Haute-Loire (Le Puy, 1791), 15-17.

58 For more on Lanthenas’s commitment to family law reform, see Perroud, ed. Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793, Appendice L (Lanthenas).

Encyclopédie, for instance, defined primogeniture as a “law against nature.” In a short book called *Inconveniences of the Rights of the Eldest*, published in August, 1789, Lanthenas repeated many of the standard Enlightenment critiques: primogeniture was an “evil,” he wrote, which “corrupt[s]” citizens and “extinguish[es]...virtues” and, left unchecked, would destroy the family, the state, and society. So when the National Assembly abolished mandatory primogeniture in March, 1790, Lanthenas almost immediately began to mobilize the network to push for the next step: equal inheritances.

Lanthenas first consulted with his peers in the network to decide which specific law he should propose to equalize inheritances. “I don’t know which decrees to ask for,” he wrote Bancal in April, 1790. “Should one abolish donations and testamens [inheritance practices that could be used to favor an eldest son] entirely; or should one simply prevent them from interfering with equality? I drafted [a decree] in the latter spirit: look and judge.” The question Lanthenas posed was a delicate one. Should he ask the National Assembly to abolish the individual right to give heirs different portions of the inheritance, or should he ask them only to

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61 “Mais la division la plus funeste fut celle que notre primogéniture introduisit dès sa naissance. Elle étouffa vos vertus: elle prit, un à un, chaque citoyen au berceau, pour le corrompre.” François Lanthenas, *Inconvéniens du droit d’aînesse, ouvrage dans lequel on démontre que toute distinction entre les enfants d’une même famille entraîne une foule de maux* (Paris: Visse, [1789]), xii and 127.


63 “Je ne sais quels décrets demander. Faut il abolir entièrement les dormation et les testamens; faut il seulement les empecher de blesser l’égalité? J’ai redigé dans cet esprit ci: verrez et jugez.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 14 mai 1790, N.A.F. 9534.
ensure that all rightful heirs got a minimum equal share of the inheritance? The former, the far more drastic course, seems to have been his preference, if we are to judge by his paean to equality in *Inconveniences*. Yet as his letters suggests, he was clearly concerned that it might prove too radical for the majority in the Assembly. His solution to this dilemma, as he and other members of the Roland circle were wont to do, was to consult his trusted correspondents.

Although Bancal’s reply is lost, it is clear from Lanthenas’s subsequent letters that he responded to the question and more. Bancal read Lanthenas’s draft address to a club (probably the Jacobin affiliate of Clermont-Ferrand) and asked them to “adopt” it. Lanthenas himself then dispatched the draft address to individuals in Lyon: “I look forward to their ideas,” he wrote Bancal. A couple of weeks later, having apparently received the feedback that he wanted, he announced that he had taken the next step: “[Representative Jérôme] Pétion is going to divide the issue of the younger sons by first making the motion to remove the sons…from the servitude of paternal power,” and only then make a motion for “equal inheritances.”

For the rest of 1790, and into 1791, Lanthenas used his private network to try to bring the latter motion to a successful vote in the Assembly. He worked directly with sympathetic members of the National Assembly, especially Pétion. He wrote them repeated letters asking for news and asked his correspondents in Paris to do the same. As with the formation of clubs, he also tried to use his private network to create the semblance of a grassroots movement. “I am eagerly waiting for you to tell me what you have been able to do with the petition for the

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65 “j’attends leur idées…” Lanthenas to Bancal, 25 mai 1790, N.A.F. 9534.

66 “M. Petion va entamer l’affaire des cadets en faisant d’abord la motion de soustraire les fils de famille à la servitude de la puissance paternelle. L’article ensuite des partages égaux ne les réunira pas de même. Ce sera l’objet d’une motion qui viendra après.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 5 juin 1790, Ibid.
younger sons,” he wrote to Bancal in mid-June after asking him to get club support for his efforts. And this strategy seems to have borne at least some fruit: the abbé Grégoire, a supporter in the Assembly, told Lanthenas that he had “read many letters addressed to the National Assembly…and that some of them cited [his] work.”

In August, 1790, with no progress towards either motion, Lanthenas sought to more systematically enlist the authority of club movement. Earlier in the year, he had helped to found a Society of Friends of Union and Equality in Families—a club devoted to the fight for family law reform. Although not well known, the club sent out a circular letter to other patriot societies throughout France, proposing that they support a petition to institute equal inheritance. The letter elicited little response: by mid-October, only the clubs of Versailles, Toulouse and Clermont-Ferrand had acknowledged receipt. Lanthenas was convinced that this was because “secret enemies” of the younger sons had intercepted the packets. A more likely explanation, given what we have seen of how clubs managed their correspondence, is that the clubs had received the letters but had been either unwilling or uninterested in responding to an unknown club. It is surely no accident that Lanthenas had good friends who were members of both the clubs of Versailles and Clermont-Ferrand.

In the face of this failure of impersonal communication, Lanthenas turned back to his personal network. In September, he wrote to Vitet, his friend who had become Lyon’s first patriot mayor in December, asking him to “get the Friends of the Constitution [the Club du 67 “J’attends avec empressément que vous me diriez ce que vous avez pu faire de la petition pour les cadets. Je vis hier l’abbé Grégoire…il venoit de lire plusieurs lettres adressées à l’ass Natl [et] il y en avoit qui la renvoyoit à mon ouvrage.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 16 juin 1790, Ibid.

67 See Desan, *Family on Trial*, 146.

Concert] to make up a petition in support of our address and to join itself to that end to the society we left in Paris [i.e., the Jacobins].” He asked Bancal to “do the same in Clermont.”

Yet it was clear that the clubs had priorities and agendas of their own, and could not easily be turned to whatever purpose Lanthenas had in mind for them. Even with Vitet’s powerful support, for example, he encountered considerable “opposition” to his efforts in Lyon. And in November, having still heard nothing back from the Jacobins, he wrote to Bancal (then in Paris) to ask him to follow up with them: “You will inform us a bit about what is happening with this affair. I hope that you will be able [puissiez vous] to make it [i.e., the request] succeed completely.”

In January, still trying to get clubs in Lyon to back his plan, Lanthenas sought to bring more public pressure to bear on them. As his friends had frequently done before, he wrote to Brissot and asked him to insert an article in favor of equal inheritances into the Patriote français. The public credibility of Brissot’s paper, Lanthenas believed, would get his petition “adopted generally in the section clubs.” Before Brissot could do this, though, Lanthenas’s personal lobbying apparently succeeded in swaying the Sociétés populaires. On January 10, 1791, he sent his address to Paris: “It was read by the 28 sections and signed by their commissioners in

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70 “qu’il engage les amis de la constituion a faire une petition à l’appui de notre adresse et à se joindre pour cet objet à la société que nous avons laissée à Paris;” “Faites en autant, à Clermont.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 4 oct 1790, N.A.F. 9534. On Vitet, see Wahl, Révolution à Lyon, 286-288.

71 See Lanthenas to Bancal, 10 janv 1791 in Bancal-Des-Issarts, Lettres autographes, 146.

72 “Vous nous informerez un peu de ce qui se passerez sur cette affaire. Puissiez vous la faire parfaitement reussir.” Lanthenas to Bancal, 9 nov 1790, N.A.F. 9534. On Bancal’s location, see Perroud, ed. Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793, 743.

73 “Vous m’aviez écrit que vous alliez inserrer l’article que je vous avois envoié sur l’adresse pour l’égalité des partages. J’avois pensé, que cela pouroit être necessaire pour la faire adopter généralement dans les clubs des sections.” Lanthenas (de Lyon) to Brissot, 15 janv 1790, 446 AP 7, Papiers Brissot.
duplicate, and I sent it all to Pétion so that he can give one to the National Assembly and the other to the Jacobins.” Here, again, a “public” document passed from one “public” body (the club) to two others (the National Assembly and the Jacobins) through private hands.

Three months later, in April, 1791, the Assembly voted to establish equal inheritance—but only in cases of intestate succession. Fully equal inheritance, as it turned out, would have to wait until 1793. Yet even though Lanthenas’s project was not immediately successful, his efforts offer a further glimpse into the interdependence of “official” and “private” epistolarity. The tightly-knit Roland network, which was based on trust and had a clear idea of its collective political goals, was ideally situated to help the clubs be politically relevant and active on a national scale. The clubs’ support, in turn, transformed the Roland circle’s private agenda into a public one and lent it much-needed popular support and legitimacy.

The patriot party in crisis: the Feuillant-Jacobin split

The growing significance of the Rolands’ private correspondence network to national patriot politics became unmistakable in the summer of 1791, when they helped prevent a bitter split in the Paris Jacobin club from tearing apart the network of affiliated clubs. The split was the result of longstanding political disagreements in the club, which burst into the open after the king attempted to flee France with his family in late June. After the royal family was captured at Varennes, near the present-day Belgian border, the Jacobins found themselves deeply divided

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over how to respond.\textsuperscript{75} Dissatisfied with the radical course that some Jacobins were advocating, a large majority of the members, led by several powerful deputies, seceded from the club on July 16\textsuperscript{th} and formed a new club, which came to be known as the Feuillants.\textsuperscript{76} The next day, in the wake of a bloody altercation on the Champ de Mars between radicals and the National Guard, the Paris municipality declared martial law and began to repress the radical patriot movement. The Jacobin rump suddenly found itself under siege on all sides.\textsuperscript{77}

For the remaining Jacobins, the most dangerous aspect of the post-Varennes crisis was the threat the Feuillants posed to the national club network from which the Jacobin club drew much of its strength. Within days of the split, the Feuillants had mounted a national campaign to persuade provincial patriots and their clubs to abandon their Jacobin affiliation and join with the new club. Scholars have documented how both the Jacobins and the Feuillants used public correspondence to coax and prod provincial clubs into their camp.\textsuperscript{78} This section shows that private correspondence, particularly that of the Rolands, played an important and until now only dimly perceived role in the Jacobins’ ultimate success in the struggle for the allegiance of the

\textsuperscript{75} On Varennes and its aftermath, see Tackett, \textit{When the King Took Flight} and Mona Ozouf, \textit{Varennes: la mort de la royauté, 21 juin 1791} (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

\textsuperscript{76} See Ran Halévi, “Feuillants” in François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., \textit{Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française} (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), 366-367. Of the major leaders of the Jacobin club before the split, only Pétion and Robespierre as well as the deputies Roederer, Grégoire and Buzot stayed at the Jacobins. For interpretations of the motives for the split, see Halévi, \textit{op. cit.}, and Kennedy, \textit{First Years}, 284-285; Higonnet, \textit{Goodness beyond Virtue}, 30-31; and Ozouf, \textit{Varennes}, 272-276.

\textsuperscript{77} See David Andress, \textit{Massacre at the Champ de Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution} (Suffolk, England: Royal Historical Society, 2001), passim.

\textsuperscript{78} On the Jacobin side, see Ozouf, \textit{Varennes}, 274-278; Peyrard, \textit{Jacobins de l’Ouest}, 82-85; and Maintenant, “Jacobins,” 77-85. On the Feuillant side, see the same works as well as Georges Michon, \textit{Essai sur l’histoire du parti feuillant Adrien Duport; correspondance inédite de Barnave en 1792} (Paris: Payot, 1924), Ch. 12.
provincial clubs. How the Jacobins went about gaining their support, moreover, reveals the central organizing role that small groups played within the Jacobin universe. Jacobin groups took the lead in reaching out to their home communities, reinforcing the existing networks within the groups and between them and specific regional power bases.

Members of the Roland circle, who were by this point all based in Paris, began to reach out to one another almost as soon as the split occurred. The earliest evidence we have comes from the pen of Mme Roland, who in this period was writing long letters to Bancal several times a week. On July 17th, she wrote to him briefly that “the reigning faction…just erected another club at the [convent of the] Feuillants, in order to balance [the Jacobins’] influence.” Continuing on the 18th, she described the provincial clubs as a central front in the struggle to keep the patriot party united and radical in the face of this split. The Feuillants, she explained to him, “are going to write or have already written to all of the affiliated Societies in order to detach them from the Jacobins and unite them to itself.” “If the départements give in to this seduction,” she assured him, “liberty is lost and we are enslaved.” At the end of the letter, however, she held out hope that “if the départements collaborate [s’entendent],” it might still be possible to safeguard “the sacred fire of liberty.”

In subsequent letters, Mme Roland instructed Bancal to work in private to win over provincial patriots to the Jacobin side. Her own correspondence, she suggested, could provide


80 “…la faction dominante de l’Assemblée nationale, réunis aux Feuillants, vont écrire ou ont déjà écrit à toutes les Sociétés affiliés pour les détacher des Jacobins et se les unir. … Si les départements cèdent à cette seduction, la liberté est perdue et nous sommes asservis au nom de la Constitution;” “Il y aurait encore de l’espérance si les départements s’entendent;” “le feu sacré de la Liberté.” Mme Roland to Bancal, 17-18 juil 1791 in Ibid., 336.
much-needed reliable information. “I believe that from my various letters you can extract a
sketch of the progress of things and the secret springs that are determining those movements;
make that sketch [faites cet extrait].” She urged him to “spread it as much as you are able,
privately, and via the members of your society [i.e., club] to the members of other societies in
many places, in order to arrest, if possible, the effect of the poison which is consuming the
empire.”

In her next letter to him, which spoke despairingly of the “complete dissolution” of
the Paris Jacobins, she reiterated her warning to him to “do nothing except privately, that is to
say, from one private citizen to another.” It was necessary to take this approach, she explained,
to protect the weakened club infrastructure: at the present juncture, the clubs’ opponents would
be “very quick to seize on [any] pretext for persecuting a vigorous society.”

By the end of the first week after the split, the entire network had begun to mobilize.
Once again, the interplay of private and public networks was crucial. From his hometown of
Riom, in the Puy-de-Dôme, Gilbert Romme wrote a hasty letter to Bosc, informing him that the
schism had spread to the local club. He assured him that those who remained loyal to the
Jacobins had written and sent an address to the Jacobins “in order to make known our persistence
in good principles.” He also enclosed with his letter a “letter we wrote at the same time to the
[other] societies of our département,” presumably to urge them to follow suit. He concluded by

81 “Je crois que, de mes différentes lettres, vous pouvez extraire un aperçu de la marche des
choses et des ressorts secrets qui déterminent les mouvements; faites cet extrait, répandez-le tant
qu’il vous sera possible, privément, et par les membres de votre Société aux membres des
Sociétés de divers lieux, afin d’arrêter, s’il est possible, l’effet du poison qui consume l’empire.”
Mme Roland to Bancal, 20 juil 1791 in Ibid., 341-342. Emphasis mine.

82 “…ne faites rien que privément, c’est-à-dire de particulier à particulier, car l’on serait fort
habile à saisir le prétexte de persécuter une Société vigoureuse.” Mme Roland to Bancal, 21 juil
1791 in Ibid., 343. The same day, Roland wrote to Champagneux, saying that in the aftermath of
the massacre on the Champs de Mars, “on ne sait plus à qui se fier.” Roland to Champagneux,
21 [juil 1791], N.A.F. 6241.
urging Bosc to “do with all of this what you judge most appropriate.”83 Not knowing the exact political situation in Paris, Romme used his private connection to Bosc, whom he trusted and knew to be well-connected among Paris patriots, to ensure that the fruits of his efforts at the local level got into the right hands and had the best possible effect on the national scene. A little more than a week later, after the local patriots had reconciled under the Jacobin banner, Romme wrote again to ask that Bosc send him a copy of the Jacobins’ “regulations” to help him write a new club charter.84

What is most striking about these efforts is not the fact that Romme, Bosc and Mme Roland thought to use their private network to keep the club movement together—although it does offer further examples of how private epistolarity could complement official letter-writing. Rather, what is most striking about their efforts in the Feuillant split is the speed with which they mobilized. The Jacobins did not publicly take their fight against the Feuillants to the provinces until after August 1, when Robespierre read out a draft of an address to the provincial clubs. And it was several more weeks before the Jacobins began actively soliciting affiliations.85 This slow reaction, although very problematic in the context of the Feuillant schism, was (as we have seen) typical of club correspondence. Official networks’ collective nature and multiple layers of

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83 “La societe de Riom a pris un arête qui révolte plusieurs d’entre nous, nous nous sommes decidés en consequence d’écrire aux Jacobins afin de manifester notre perseverance dans les bons principes. Vous recevrez l’adresse que nous écrirons, je joins ici la lettre que nous écrions en meme tems aux sociéites de notre département. Faites de tout ceci l’usage que vous jugerez convenable.” Romme [Riom] to Bosc, 23 juil [1791], Mss 1009, Papiers Louis-Augustin Bosc d’Antic, Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris, Paris.

84 Romme [Riom] to Bosc, 2 aout 1791, Mss 1009, Papiers Bosc. Bosc was also in communication with the club in Clermont-Ferrand via private avenues, although less information has survived about that connection: see Dubreul [Riom] to Bosc, 6 aout 1791, Mss 1009, Papiers Bosc.

85 See Maintenant, “Jacobins,” 78-79.
transparency made activating them a cumbersome process. So it fell to more nimble private networks, which could react faster and in a more tightly focused fashion, to spearhead the effort against the Feuillants in the provinces.

The greatest activity among the members of the Roland group in the wake of the Feuillant schism focused on Lyon, France’s second city and the Rolands’ home base. On July 23, Roland wrote to his friend Luc-Antoine Champagneux, a Lyon publisher and close political ally, to inquire about the stance of the city’s Jacobin affiliate, the Club du Concert.86 He had heard [“on dit”] that it had affiliated with the Feuillants, but wanted more certain news. “I beg you,” he wrote, “to tell me what is happening [ce qu’il en est]; we know that letters have gone out across France to monopolize the societies [for the Feuillants]. I want and I need to know which side the Lyon [club] is on.” Perhaps in the hope that it might not have made a decision yet, he also assured Champagneux that “many of the affiliated societies were outraged by the Feuillants’ coalition and decided to remain attached to the remaining Jacobins.”87

Within a matter of days, Roland and the other members of the circle in Paris received the bad news: the Club du Concert had indeed affiliated with the Feuillants. In fact, the Club had moved quickly to shift its allegiance, offering an object lesson in why it was essential to move fast to combat the Feuillants’ influence in the provinces. At a meeting on July 27, almost as soon as news of the split was received in Lyon, the Club du Concert cut its ties with the “impure


87 “Je vous prie de me mandez ce qu’il en est ; on sait que des courriers ont fait le tour de la France pour accaparer ces sociétés. Je desire et j’ai besoin de savoir la partie qu’a pris celle de Lyon.” Roland to Champagneux, 24 juil 1791, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 6241, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Indeed, the Feuillants had written to every Jacobin affiliate to convince them to join them: see Maintenant, “Jacobins,” 107.
fraction” that remained at the Jacobins and swore to “correspond only” with the Feuillants.88 Roland tried to brazen out this disappointing news: he and others, he wrote, had “expected this behavior from them,” and he reiterated that such conduct was unusual: it had been “imitated,” he claimed, “by very few other affiliated societies.” The Jacobins, Roland went on, bending the truth more than a little, had never been “more brilliant, and their glory more assured.”89

In spite of the bravado, however, the situation for the Jacobins in Lyon was not encouraging. In addition to the loss of the Club du Concert, the Club Central had remained publicly silent on the split in Paris. A number of its component Sociétés populaires had either gone over to the Feuillants or split in two.90 An important reason for this was that the Feuillants, too, had been making effective use of their private correspondence. Members of the club had “written to all of their acquaintances” in Lyon “to engage them to request [Feuillant] affiliations from the Sociétés populaires.” Indeed, these letters had in some cases arrived well before those sent by partisans of the Jacobins: “We saw many of [their] letters some days before yours,” two of Lanthenas’s Lyon correspondents informed him.91 Nor should we be surprised that the Feuillants’ private letter-writing campaign was so rapid or proved so effective, at least in the

88 Wahl, Révolution à Lyon, 400.

89 “…l’on s’attendait à cette démarche de leur part, laquelle a été imitée de tres peu d’autres sociétés affiliées… Jamais les Jacobins ne furent plus brillants, et leur gloire plus assurée.” Roland to Champagneux, 4 aout 1791, N.A.F. 6241.

90 Edmonds, Jacobinism, 97-103. The Croix-Rousse section split and even then remained relatively moderate in its condemnation of the Feuillants: see Deliberations of the Societe des Amis de la Constitution de Lyon (Section de la Croix-Rousse), 24 juil, 1 aout and 17 aout 1791, AD Rhone 34 L 3. For more examples of provincial clubs that vacillated between the two, see Peyrard, Jacobins de l’Ouest, 83-84; Kennedy, Marseilles, 95-97; and Hanson, Provincial Politics, 49.

short term. The members of the Feuillants, after all, had until just a few weeks before been
Jacobins themselves: they knew as well as their new opponents did how the provincial club
network operated.

By the end of August, the “good news” carried in letters from the Roland circle and
others, along with the Jacobin club’s public pronouncements, had managed to coax the Club
Central back into the Jacobin camp.92 The Richard brothers, leading members of the well-off
Saint-Nizier club,93 were entrusted by the Club with its request for a Jacobin affiliation.
Naturally, they passed it on to the Jacobins privately, through the hands of their good friend
Lanthenas.94 As was usual, they expected that their trusted correspondent would be their
“interpreter…before the Jacobin Club and that [he] would leave nothing undone so that [the Club
Central’s] request…might be favorably received.” Indeed, they were so accustomed to using
private means that they expected to find out the result of their request by private letter as well.95

In the event, the Jacobin Club received the request from Lyon at their August 28 meeting
and immediately accorded the Club Central its affiliation. It is difficult to know for certain
whether Lanthenas’s help—which probably also meant the support of Roland and Brissot,

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92 See Mme Roland to Champagneux, 31 juil 1791 in Perroud, ed. Lettres de madame Roland:
1780-1793, 356; “bons avis” Freres Richard to Lanthenas, 22 aout 1791, N.A.F. 9534; and letters
cited above.

93 On the Richards, see Lanthenas to Bancal, 31 aout 1791 in Bancal-Des-Issarts, Lettres
autographes, 319. On Saint-Nizier, see Edmonds, Jacobinism, 73-86.

94 Freres Richard to Lanthenas, 22 aout 1791, N.A.F. 9534. Their letter actually ended in mid-
thought in order to “profiter du courier du jour afin que vous receviez plutôt la lettre du comité
central ci incluse par laquelle il demande l’affiliation.”

95 “Nous sommes convaincus, et votre patriotisme nous en est un sûr garant, que vous aurez été
l’interprète du comité central auprès du club des jacobins et que vous n’aurez rien négligé pour
que sa demande, incluse dans notre dree datée du 22 dt, ait été accueillie favorablement. Nous en
apprendrons de vous la nouvelle avec une joie, une satisfaction indiscible.” Freres Richard to
Lanthenas, 25 aout 1791, Ibid. Emphasis mine.
among others—contributed to the quick acceptance of the Club Central’s request. Certainly, it would have been logical for the Paris Jacobins to act quickly in response to a request from a club in Lyon, one of the largest cities in France, regardless of who supported it. Yet it is striking that of the seven societies that requested their affiliation at that meeting, Lyon was one of only three that gained it immediately.96

The Club Central’s affiliation proved to be an indication of how other provincial Jacobin affiliates would act. Over the next two months, provincial clubs gradually turned away from the Feuillants and expressed their loyalty to the Jacobins. By November, 1791, the Feuillant network had been reduced to a fifth (at most) of the size of the one over which the reinvigorated Jacobins presided. As the Feuillants’ stable of affiliates diminished, moreover, the club itself went into a decline: as the fall wore on, more and more members defected back to the Jacobins. By January, 1792, the Feuillants had become a rump with almost no political influence; the Jacobins had won the struggle for control of the patriot movement. And private letter-writing had contributed as much to this outcome as had the club’s slower official efforts.97

**Conclusion**

The Jacobin epistolary network, this chapter has shown, was a more complex machine than scholars have usually thought. The literature, insofar as it has attended to how the network worked, has focused almost exclusively on the clubs’ official letter-writing. There is no doubt that this type of communication was essential in forming, mobilizing and radicalizing a patriot party across France: the public-ness of official letters, as we have seen, gave them an authenticity

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97 See Maintenant, “Jacobins,” 95-97 and Kennedy, *First Years*, Ch. XV.
and authority that made them stand out from other political communications. Yet the weaknesses inherent in public epistolarity—in particular its inflexible form, relatively slow production and dependence on club reputation—meant that it could not achieve the patriot movement’s aims by itself.

At least in Lyon and the nearby regions, the story of political organizing was one of collaboration. From the Lyon Club Central’s initial affiliation with the Jacobins through the fight for equal inheritance laws to the Feuillant-Jacobin schism, we have seen, the Roland group’s private correspondence was an indispensable adjunct to the clubs’ official epistolarity. It was a relationship, moreover, that was also essential to the Rolands and their friends, as we saw most clearly in the case of inheritance reform. They needed the clubs’ help—which was not always easily given—to gain public support for the aims that they had decided to pursue. Given the central place that the Jacobin clubs occupy in accounts of the formation of a revolutionary public sphere, these collaborative forms of organizing suggests the need for greater attention to the persistent importance of private networks and organizing.

Collaboration in practice between public and private networks and media, I would further argue, was widespread in the early years of the Revolution: the practice was not limited to the Rolands and their circle or to the Lyonnais and surrounding regions. From the earliest days of the National Assembly, deputies from all areas of the country maintained an interconnected web of public and private communications with friends at home and with their constituents and local public administrators.98 These individuals, who included many of the early Jacobin leaders,

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98 See Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: the Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 234-239. Although Tackett does not systematically distinguish which type of letter he is discussing at any given moment, many of the letters home he discusses were in fact personal correspondences which ran alongside public ones (see Ibid., 11-12).
regularly used their private correspondence for public purposes. The brothers Robert and Thomas Lindet, for instance, wrote each other regularly, frequently passing sensitive information they did not share with their constituents. And they regularly asked each other to circulate letters to certain people or incite clubs or local governments to act in particular ways.\footnote{See, e.g., Amand Montier, ed. Correspondance de Thomas Lindet pendant la constitante et la législative (1789-1792) (Paris: Société de l’histoire de la Révolution française, 1899), 272-273, 280 and 324-325.} In similar fashion, it has been shown that Jacobin newspaper editors in Normandy used private networks to shape and filter the public information they shared.\footnote{Peyrard, Jacobins de l’Ouest, 204ff.} And as Marisa Linton has convincingly shown, Robespierre linked together public networks and private friendships as he sought to identify political allies in the early years of the Republic.\footnote{Marisa Linton, “Fatal Friendships: The Politics of Jacobin Friendship,” French Historical Studies 31, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 69-75.}

Evidence of collaboration should also cause us to reconsider the role of patriot newspapers in creating a new and powerful kind of public sphere in print. Recent scholarship has emphasized the unprecedented character of revolutionary print culture in terms of its volume, reach and critical depth.\footnote{For some examples of these claims, see Jeremy D. Popkin, Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789-1799 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 4-5 and passim; Hugh Gough, The Newspaper Press in the French Revolution (London: Routledge, 1988), 232-234; and Claude Labrosse and Pierre Réat, Naissance du journal révolutionnaire, 1789 (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1989), 240ff. For an argument about the press and its relationship to the public sphere coming from the point of view of the pre-revolutionary period, see also Jack Richard Censer, The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment (London: Routledge, 1994), 208-214.} While there is certainly truth to these claims, the evidence of the Roland circle’s interaction with print culture, particularly in the form of Brissot’s Patriote français, suggests that they need to be qualified. Like Brissot’s practice of printing news and
opinion drawn from his private correspondence, which was largely continuous with the practice of old regime newspaper editors, much of the practice of newspaper publishing under absolutism seems to have persisted into the new regime.\textsuperscript{103} The Roland circle’s moderately successful efforts to control what Brissot published, moreover, complicate the notion that print culture offered a purely “public” space of debate and discussion. In fact, as we have seen, patriots were constantly working in private, using private networks and arguments hidden from the public, to shape the flow and content of news.

During the year and a half following the Varennes crisis, the Jacobin movement paradoxically cemented its place at the center of national politics while its leadership unraveled from within. Both halves of this story are well known—the Jacobins’ seizure of the state and their acrimonious, ultimately fratricidal scission—and the relationship between the two has been a subject of historical research for generations. This chapter aims to contribute to the debate by showing that the Jacobins’ rise to power brought about rapid changes in their letter writing practices, which contributed to the breakdown of the leadership’s ability to resolve conflicts and maintain internal unity. During the year and a half from mid-1791 to the end of 1792, as the radical patriot leadership gravitated more and more towards Paris and gained increasing formal political power, the radical patriots’ epistolary practice underwent a striking series of transformations. The stream of friendly, dialogic long-distance letters that had formed a large part of their correspondences dried up. In their place emerged a dual system of highly local correspondence, carried on through billets (short, familiar notes), alongside an increasingly formal long-distance correspondence sent and received by patriots primarily in their capacities as agents, government officials and club representatives.

The new epistolary patterns bred and strengthened factionalism among the patriot leadership in Paris. Billet culture reinforced pre-existing lines of division: the lack of uncontrolled, non-public spaces in which patriot leaders could meet meant that billet culture played an outsized role in structuring their sociability. The billet’s deliberately casual form and
the expectation of familiarity that it carried meant that it was good for cementing bonds but ill-suited to the task of linking together the various Jacobin circles. The growing formality of the Jacobin leaders’ correspondence with patriots outside of Paris reinforced links between patriot leaders and those whom they represented, often at the expense of a broader consensus and identification with the Jacobin movement more broadly. Divisions fostered by epistolary practices, in turn, played a role in the breakdown of Jacobin unity in 1792. Indeed, both Girondins and Montagnards cited each other’s letter writing practices as evidence of their political perfidy—a dispute which culminated in the use of epistolary practices as key evidence in the 1793 trials of the Girondins.

This chapter contributes to the historiography of the Girondin-Montagnard split in two main ways. First, it reveals previously undetected changes in the epistolary practices of the Jacobin elite, which were both connected to their shifting political position and were instrumental in making it possible. The structure of social interactions within the Jacobin leadership in Paris, and its interactions with the patriot movement outside of Paris, helped to produce and deepen the factionalism of the Jacobin elite. Second, it uses the correspondence of key figures on both sides of the split to show that the Jacobins, both Girondin and Montagnard, in fact had very similar epistolary practices and social organization in 1791 and 1792. This distinctively Jacobin sociability grounded in correspondence practices, I argue, helped cause the Girondin-Montagnard split.

Sociability among the patriot leadership in Paris, 1791-1792

Radical patriots’ correspondence practices changed starting in 1791. Spurred in part by their increasing centralization in Paris, the leadership began to shift away from their reliance on
long, dialogic letters written in a scholarly mode. Indeed, there was hardly a need for such correspondence once the key leaders of the patriot party had mostly moved to Paris. Instead, they increasingly wrote another type of letter: the billet, a form of very short familiar missive. As we have already seen, even when the American patriot leadership came together in Philadelphia in 1774, they quickly began to build broad face-to-face networks, linked together by agreement about a common set of principles, which mirrored the type of bonds that they had formed through mercantile-style correspondence. The French patriot leadership reacted very differently to being brought together in Paris over the course of 1791 and 1792. They organized themselves into tight circles of close friends and collaborators, not unlike the small networks which they had created via correspondence. These circles were intense—patriots spent a good deal of time with a relatively small group of people—but each one remained relatively isolated from the others.

The rise of both billets and formal correspondence were the result of the radical patriot leadership’s increasing concentration in Paris, culminating with the Legislative Assembly of late 1791. Radicals had been present in Paris as early as the first meeting of the Estates General: the role that radical members of that body played, especially in forming the Breton club which would later become the basis for the Paris Jacobins, is well known. Some other radicals, including Roland, arrived in 1790 and the first half of 1791 as agents for governmental bodies or clubs. But it was the Constituent Assembly’s 1791 “self-denying ordinance,” prohibiting any member of that body from serving in the new Legislative Assembly, which brought a substantial new crop of patriot leaders from the provinces in to Paris. Because patriots had taken control of
local governments in much of France, they were able to advance their candidates in the elections for the legislature.¹

Patriot leaders newly arrived from the provinces reveled in the public ceremony of Paris’s political institutions; newcomers spoke with awe of the Assembly and the Jacobin club. But the political experience of provincial patriots had habituated them to private organizing as well, to face to face contacts among patriot leaders and behind-the-scenes planning before public meetings. This private organizing, as we saw in the previous chapter, was crucial to the success of the patriot movement. Yet Paris at first seemed to defeat any attempt at recreating this provincial order. As Roland observed, “Paris is very large” and the patriots “live far from one another.”² Finding and meeting with other patriot leaders, in this metropolis, was no mean task.

Though a number of the newcomers in 1791/92 were legislators, their participation in the Assemblies did little to help them build private networks with other like-minded patriots. With nearly 1200 deputies in the Constituent and some 750 in the Legislative, anonymity was the rule, even among deputies. To make matters worse, the hall where they met, the Riding School (Manège), had terrible acoustics, which made it impossible for most deputies to give speeches (the best way to become known in the Assembly) or even hearing many of the ones that were


delivered.³ Add to this the absence of formal parties—a product of the visceral eighteenth century revulsion against party⁴—and it becomes clear why the Assembly provided little opportunity for the development of useful sociability among radical patriots.

The Jacobin club, which was the natural focal point in Paris for radical patriots, suffered from many of the same shortcomings as a locus for face-to-face encounters. Like the National Assembly, the Jacobins was a theatricalized public space.⁵ Since it had been decided in 1790 to admit non-members to the meetings, members and speakers regularly faced packed galleries, an inquisitive and rowdy audience filled with watchful eyes, ready to notice any disagreements or rapprochements among the membership. This stage-like quality made the Jacobins the perfect venue for all manner of public displays of patriot zeal and affinity: witness the visits by ministers (such as Dumouriez in early 1792) to don the red Phrygian bonnet, or the celebrated, theatrical reconciliation between Robespierre and Brissot in late 1791. But the same qualities made it a difficult place to undertake internal discussions, away from the pressures of the public eye, that could sustain the unity of the patriot party in the face of the many challenges that it encountered.⁶


⁵ For the remainder of this paragraph, see Sophie Wahnich, *La longue patience du peuple* (Paris: Payot, 2008), 107-121.

⁶ The members were well aware of this themselves. See, for example, Alphonse Aulard, ed. *La société des Jacobins. Recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*, 6 vols. (Paris: Librairie Jouaust, 1889), 3:533. “M. Basire. — Il est à craindre que toutes ces dénonciations ne produisent un schisme, une division dans cette Société. Cessons de rendre cette tribune l’arène des combats les plus scandaleux. Des luttes de ce genre doivent se faire par la voie des journaux et celle des mémoires imprimés. J’engage donc M. Robespierre à ne pas prolonger davantage une discussion dont il est très difficile de suivre le fil dans une
To compensate for these shortcomings of the public venues for organizing, radical patriot leaders met on an ad-hoc basis in private and semi-private spaces, including homes and coffeehouses.7 To organize these meetings and even more informal encounters, patriot leaders used billets, a distinctive form of short missive. Physically, billets were short letters, often written on a fragment of paper rather than a sheet cut to a standard size. They were usually delivered by messenger or via an intermediary rather than through the post; they frequently omitted the full date and included a time of day instead.8 Though relatively few have survived—not surprising, given their occasional purpose—Paris in the waning days of the French monarchy was crisscrossed with billets.9

The use of billets among patriot leaders could reaffirm the close bonds of friendship that united many of them with one another. Because the form of the billet deliberately left little room

assemblée aussi nombreuse, du moment qu’il ne s’agit pas de faits à prouver, de pièces à déposer, mais d’un système qui, pour être développé, a dit M. Robespierre, a besoin d’un grand nombre de rapprochements, toujours difficiles à saisir au milieu du tumulte qui naît nécessairement du choc d’intérêts aussi violemment sentis que nous avons pu nous en apercevoir dans cette séance.”

7 This practice had a long history in the old regime: private salons and meetings had been typical of both court life and of the scholarly world of the philosophes. See especially Antoine Lilti, Le monde des salons : sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Fayard, 2005) and Dena Goodman, The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), Ch. 3.

8 None of the Roland circle’s surviving billets has a wrapper or bears a postal mark, strongly suggesting that they were transmitted by non-postal routes. See also the mention of transmission by friends in Mme Roland to Bosc, 2 sep 1791, Claude Perroud, ed. Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793 (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1900-02), 370. For the lack of dates on billets, see Mme Roland to Bosc, “jeudi matin,” Ibid., 421 and Brissot to Condorcet, n.d. [1791], Claude Perroud, ed. J.P. Brissot Correspondance et papiers, précédés d’un advertissement et d’une notice sur sa vie (Paris,: A. Picard & fils, 1912), 278.

9 L.-S. Mercier indicated that billets were regularly used by denizens of Paris. “Les billets économisent le temps, remplacent les visites, & sont qu’on ne se déplace pas pour des riens,” he wrote: Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Tableau de Paris, Nouvelle ed. (Amsterdam, 1782), 2:240.
for the formal expressions that eighteenth-century writers used to signal relationships, its effect was to convey and reinforce familiarity. “I am here,” wrote Mme Roland to Bosc, “I have only the time to take up a piece of paper and leave again; I barely have a piece of paper here to write on.” The note ended abruptly with a simple “Until soon.”¹⁰ A 1792 message from Merlin de Douai to Roland shows even more directly the high level of personal intimacy that billet-writers permitted themselves. “Good evening to Papa Roland,” he began, “and I beg him to pay the cost of [sending] our mail.” The note ended two lines later with the highly familiar valediction, “I most cordially embrace you.”¹¹ Even for individuals who knew each other quite well, such brevity and familiarity was the exception rather than the rule in written communication.

Of course, not all billet writers were such good friends as Bosc, the Rolands and Merlin de Douai. When writing to individuals with whom they were less familiar, patriot leaders often used the more formal third person to signal their relative lack of familiarity. This was the case in a 1791 note from Arthur Dillon to Brissot, sending copies of one of his speeches. “Civility for civility. Mr. A. Dillon sends Mr. Brissot six copies of the grounds for his opinion of the previous day.”¹² Similarly, to issue an invitation to a working dinner in 1792, Mme Roland wrote in the

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¹¹ “Je souhaite le bon soir au papa Roland et le prie de payer la dépense de nos couriers;” “Je vous embrasse bien cordialement” Merlin de Douai to Roland, 3 sept [1792] (f. 145), N.A.F. 6243. Familiarity was an important characteristic of social relationships in the eighteenth century: it was the quality of being able to ignore social barriers and be “free and unconstrained” with one another. It is to be distinguished from *intimacy*: as Sarah Pearsall has illustrated clearly, one could be intimate without being familiar. This was the case, for instance, with servants. See Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 57-59.

third person: “Madame Roland is convening some patriots to dinner with her husband tomorrow, Monday. She invites Mr. Dulaure to come … Sunday 13 May 4 at the Hôtel de l’Intérieur at 4.” As was common in such third-person billets, neither Mme Roland nor Arthur Dillon signed their notes.

The absence of ceremony in billets had both potential advantages and disadvantages as a tool for private organizing. On the positive side, it provided patriots with a means to express their closeness to one another, reinforcing ideological agreement with union of the affections: even the billets written in the third person conveyed more familiarity to their recipients than almost any other kind of political correspondence. This was useful for a patriot movement that relied on the bonds of friendship to ensure political reliability and unity. On the other hand, the lack of ceremony in billets necessarily gave them a limited capacity to build patriot unity. Absent the ritualized language of salutations and valedictions, billets were best suited to strengthening pre-existing bonds rather than creating new ones. They were likely, that is, to reinforce the circles of friendship that already existed.

In practice, these letter writing habits helped Jacobin leaders establish a particular kind of sociability among themselves in the capital: a system of tight circles of close friends that collaborated closely within themselves but had relatively tenuous bonds with the members of other circles. The Rolands and Lanthenas offer one example of the fragmentation of Jacobin sociability in Paris. After their arrival in Paris in early 1791, the Rolands built a tight network of friends and allies. In his very first letter from Paris, at the end of February, 1791, Roland indicated that he was forming the same kinds of close bonds that he had built with a small group

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of patriots in Lyon. He mentioned meetings with only two groups of individuals: he had “spoken a great deal” with the Lyon representatives to the National Assembly, whom he found evasive, and had spent significant amounts of time with Lanthenas.\textsuperscript{14} Later that week, he indicated in another letter that he had met with a number of others at his home, including Grégoire, Brissot and Garran Coulon.\textsuperscript{15} He also mentioned the names of several Lyon patriots, whom he asked Champagneux to speak to or direct in various ways.\textsuperscript{16}

The following week, Roland wrote again to Champagneux. This time, he again mentioned Lanthenas and added Bosc. He also mentioned that he had passed a memoire from Lanthenas on to Antoine-François Delandine, a conservative Lyon-born representative, whom Roland—in spite of their growing political differences—called “our dear comrade.”\textsuperscript{17} A few days later, he tried to see “our friend” the liberal abbé Sicard, to whom Lanthenas had written a letter. He seems to have spent a substantial amount of time with his co-envoy from the city of Lyon, Bret.\textsuperscript{18} In his next surviving letter to Champagneux, sent in mid-April, Roland suggested that these extensive linkages to other Lyonnais in Paris were not only of his own creation. Blot, he told his friend, “has not said a word to any one of his friends here, since he left.” This information, of course, revealed that Roland himself was in contact with those friends of Blot.\textsuperscript{19} This seems to have continued to be the state of affairs into June.

\textsuperscript{14}“beaucoup cause » [Roland] to Champagneux, 25 fev 1791, N.A.F. 6241.

\textsuperscript{15}On Garran, see Perroud, ed. \textit{Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793}, 2:167n1.

\textsuperscript{16}Roland to Champagneux, 28 fev 1791, N.A.F. 6241.

\textsuperscript{17}“notre cher camarade.” [Roland] to Champagneux, 2 mar 1791, Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18}“notre ami” See [Roland] to Champagneux, 11 mar 1791, N.A.F. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19}“n’a dit mot à aucun de ses amis ici, depuis qu’il en est parti.” Roland (Paris) to Champagneux, 16 avr 1791, Ibid.
Mme Roland’s correspondence yields a similar list of close acquaintances, which not surprisingly overlaps heavily with that of her husband. Shortly after arriving, she enthused that she had been to see “le brave Petion” in company with Brissot.\textsuperscript{20} She saw much of Garran Coulon and Brissot over the next months.\textsuperscript{21} The only major difference between her social life and that of Roland was that she, as a native of the Paris region, spent time with old friends and relatives as well as with political allies.\textsuperscript{22} The list of people with whom she was not acquainted, at least at first, is also revealing about the fractionated nature of the patriot party. As late as the end of March, she still had not met the abbé Fauchet, though she had “heard him many times.”\textsuperscript{23} By April, she was talking about the Cercle Social, but without giving any indication that she was close to its members.\textsuperscript{24} She and her husband seem only to have met Clavière, who would become a close ally in 1792, in mid-April, 1791.\textsuperscript{25} In short, by the time of the Varennes crisis, the Rolands were still relying on a relatively small group of trusted friends and friends of friends.

Lanthenas, in the same period, occupied himself with a slightly different circle of friends. First among them was Brissot, with whom Lanthenas seems to have spent a good part of most

\textsuperscript{20} Mme Roland to Bosc, n.d. [end of Feb, 1791], Perroud, ed. \textit{Lettres de madame Roland: 1780-1793}, 2:239.

\textsuperscript{21} See Mme Roland to Bancal, 7 mars 1791, Ibid., 2:242; Mme Roland to Bancal, 15 mars 1791, Ibid., 2:245-246; Mme Roland to Bancal, 22 mars 1791, Ibid., 2:247. She only mentions seeing Grégoire for the first time in Mme Roland to Bancal, 12 mai 1791, Ibid., 2:277.

\textsuperscript{22} See Mme Roland to Bancal, 7 mars 1791, Ibid., 2:240 and Mme Roland to Bancal, 22 mars 1791, Ibid., 2:249.

\textsuperscript{23} See Mme Roland to Champagneux, 29 mars 1791, Ibid., 2:252. Though she praises Fauchet highly in this letter, her specification that “je j’ai entendu plusieurs fois” suggests that she had not made his acquaintance in person.

\textsuperscript{24} Mme Roland to Bancal, 5 avr 1791, Ibid., 2:258.

\textsuperscript{25} Mme Roland to Bancal, 14 avr 1791, Ibid., 2:260.
days. Having been in Paris since the start of the Revolution, Lanthenas was of course broadly acquainted with many members of the patriot party. Yet like the Rolands themselves, from the available evidence, Lanthenas moved in a few relatively circumscribed circle. In spite of the considerable time he had spent in Lyon, and his connections to the Lyon club movement, Lanthenas seems to have had much less to do with the Lyonnais patriots in Paris than his friends the Rolands. Their names appear nowhere in his correspondence in the first half of 1791. Instead, he repeatedly mentions two groups: the Cercle Social and the Société des Amis des Noirs. The mentions are both general and to specific individuals closely associated with both. From the Cercle Social, he revealed meetings with the abbé Claude Fauchet, the Cercle’s president, and the translator J.-P. Parraud and the Anglo-American radical Thomas Paine; Lanthenas and Parraud were then working on a translation of the his *Rights of Man*. From the Amis des Noirs, he mentioned the Swiss banker Etienne Clavière.26 Since the surviving evidence is relatively thin, this accounting is surely less reliable than that for the Rolands. However, it is also supported by what we know of Lanthenas’s publishing activities during these months.27

What was true of the Rolands and their friends was also true of the man who would become their nemesis in 1793, Maximilien Robespierre. Before 1789, Robespierre’s sphere of correspondence had been largely limited to his native region, the area around the northeastern town of Arras. A lawyer, Robespierre engaged in a combination of practical lawyering, mostly

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26 Lanthenas to Bancal (in London), apr 1791, N.A.F. 9534.

before the local Parlement, and work for political and judicial reform.²⁸ Most of his surviving correspondence from this period is with A.-J. Buissart, a local lawyer some twenty years his senior with a deep interest in experimental science.²⁹ Yet after his arrival in Paris in July, 1789, as a representative to the Estates General, Robespierre and his brother, Augustin, maintained a clear epistolary focus on a relatively small number of friends. There are a total of 134 surviving letters from the two in the years from mid-1789 to mid-1792.³⁰ Their most frequent non-family correspondent was still Buissart (15 letters). There were ten letters between the brothers themselves. There were ten letters from Guffroy, a future conventionnel from Arras, to Robespierre, with the largest number coming in September, 1791.³¹

The virtual lack of overlap between the circles of Robespierre and the Rolands throughout the period is striking in light of the fact that they remained ostensibly close allies until 1792. It is not surprising that no letters between Brissot and Robespierre have survived: both would have had an interest in destroying them once the conflict between the sides deepened. Yet there is not a single mention in Robespierre’s surviving letters of any of the other intimates of the Rolands (Bosc, Bancal and Lanthenas), notwithstanding the fact that Bancal and Lanthenas were both Jacobins in good standing until Thermidor and members of the Convention. Robespierre is likewise absent from the Roland circle’s correspondence until quite late, in the spring of 1791. The first reference to him is a glancing mention by Mme Roland in a passage of


³⁰ This includes both the Ibid., v. 3: Correspondance and the Supplement to the Correspondance.

a letter about the Treasury. And even after he appears, for most of the remainder of 1791 his name appeared in the correspondence only as a figure seen at the tribune of the Assembly, or as a writer. Indeed, the sole link between the two future factions throughout 1791 was Pétion, who was good friends with Robespierre and had become a fast friend of the Rolands soon after their arrival in Paris.

The few instances of correspondence between the Roland and Robespierre circles serve to confirm both the relative lack of connection between the circles and correspondence’s role in reinforcing the division. By the spring of 1792, during Roland’s brief first tour in the ministry, Brissot and Robespierre had already begun to have open disagreements in the Jacobins and the Assembly, primarily over foreign policy. In an effort to manage the emerging divisions, Mme Roland decided to try to have a face to face conversation with Robespierre. So as patriots did, she wrote him a letter. In it, she attested to the absence of organic, unplanned social connection between the two circles. You “have avoided me,” she wrote, “you have not let me know about anything, and, in that time, you have raised public opinion against those who do not agree with you.” Clearly, this could not have been the case if the patriots from different circles were seeing one another socially.

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33 See Ibid., 2:270, 277, 303-304.


What’s more, the correspondence between the two did not merely reflect a divide but also participated in creating it. It is no accident that even though the bulk of Mme Roland’s surviving 1792 letters are billets, she wrote Robespierre a formal letter. Its tone resembled that of correspondence to an individual she did not know well: “I wanted to see you, Sir,” she began, “because, believing you to [have] a fierce love for liberty, [and] a complete devotion to the public good, if found in speaking with you the pleasure and the utility that good citizens experience in expressing their sentiments and enlightening their opinions.” The length of the letter and its expository constructions also marked it out as formal: counting roughly 400 words, it did not leave space for the chatty informality of a letter to a good friend but it exceeded the bounds of a billet. The letter itself served to set their relationship, and indeed the relationship between their respective circles of friends and allies, on a formal and relatively impersonal footing.

None of the other leading patriot figures has a surviving correspondence that is large enough to make possible a similar analysis of their friendships and alliances during the early years of the Revolution. However some of their memoirs confirm the pattern of a small circle of close friends. Larevellière-Lépeaux, a leading Jacobin who survived to become a Director after 1795, described the tight group of friends that he formed in the earliest days of the National Assembly. Tellingly, it revolved in good measure around the “Thouin family, of the Jardin des

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36 “J’ai désiré vous voir, Monsieur,” she began, “parce que, vous croyant un ardent amour pour la liberté, un entier dévouement au bien public, je trouvais, à vous entretenir, le plaisir et l’utilité que goûtent les bons citoyens en exprimant leurs sentiments, en éclairant leurs opinions.” Mme Roland to Robespierre, 25 avr 1792, Ibid., 418-419.

37 Sieyès destroyed or did not keep the vast majority of his correspondence (see the Archives Sieyès, Archives Nationales). All that survives of the papers of Pétion and Clavière are fragments of their correspondence that were confiscated (see below, Bibliography). Grégoire’s correspondence is similarly fragmentary. Virtually nothing remains of the correspondence of Carra, Desmoulins, Danton and Chabot.
plantes de Paris.” He formed a close friendship with the family of scientists, spending “every Sunday, and even almost every evening” together. This group fused with the family of his other close friend, L.-N. Pincepré de Buire; and once the deputies’ wives arrived they all formed an “intimate” unit.38 Bertrand Barère, another Jacobin who would become a leading member of the Committee of Public Safety, also moved among a relatively small circle. Though he had come to Paris as early as 1788, he was slow to form friendships with other Jacobin leaders. He did not attend the Jacobin club until well into 1790 and until as late as 1792 he associated primarily with a circle of more conservative patriot figures, such as Talleyrand, Lafayette, Sieyès and the Lameth brothers, rather than with radicals such as Robespierre or the individuals associated with the Cercle Social.39

The Rolands, Brissot, Robespierre, Larevellière-Lépeaux, Barère: notwithstanding the assertions that they and other Jacobins made about the fraternity and unity of the patriot party, on the day-to-day level of social interactions, they lived mostly separate lives in 1791 and 1792. Each one socialized with a relatively small group of other patriot leaders. Of course, all of these Jacobin figures were in communication with one another via a number of routes: in the Jacobin

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39 B. Barère, H. Carnot, and Pierre-Jean David d’Angers, Mémoires de B. Barère, membre de la Constituante, de la Convention, du Comité de salut public, et de la Chambre des représentants, publiés par MM. Hippolyte Carnot ... et David (d’Angers) ... précédés d’une notice historique (Paris: J. Labitte, 1842), 1:292-295. Note that he mentions associating with Talleyrand and the Lameth both at the Club of 1789 and at the home of Mme de Genlis. The overlap in the circles at these two venues suggests again the social density that reinforced patriots’ commitment to their respective circles. Barère’s friendship with the Lameth and others, in spite of their differences of opinion, may be owing to his associating with the “Americans” dating back to 1788; see Leo Gersho, Bertrand Barere: A Reluctant Terrorist (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), 53-54.
club, in the legislature and its committees, and through the mediation of a few individuals (notably Pétion and Grégoire) who were linked to all the factions. But these links lacked the manifest affective depth of the links that each leader had with his or her own group of close allies. What is perhaps most surprising is that these circles did not correspond particularly well with the politics and ultimate political stances of the individuals. Roland consorted with conservative deputies from home and Barère socialized with the Lameth and others who would become his political opponents. This suggests that political ideology, though of course important to these individuals, did not shape their social lives. Indeed, precisely the reverse may be true.

The Jacobins as official correspondents

At about the same time as the patriot leadership was developing an increasingly informal and tightly-knit set of networks in Paris itself, their epistolary relationships with the provinces were changing as well. As growing numbers of provincial patriot leaders arrived in Paris in 1791 and 1792, they entered into the longstanding practice of engaging in regular, formal exchanges of letters with their home towns and provinces. These exchanges took two main forms: official correspondence with constituted bodies and didactic (or “patriotic”) letters with clubs and in some cases municipalities. These two kinds of letters came out of the different epistolary traditions and had considerably different conventions. Yet they shared one important feature that differentiated them starkly from the scholarly-type letters that we have seen before: both types of letter offered little chance for dialogue or debate between sender and recipient.

The practice of official letter writing by patriot leaders in Paris was as old as the Revolution itself. The deputies to the Estates General and National Assembly—indeed, “virtually all of the Third Estate deputies”—sent regular letters back to government bodies in the
regions that had elected them.\textsuperscript{40} This correspondence, in turn, drew on models of administrative letter-writing descended from medieval forms of correspondence between monarchs and their servants. In the broadest terms, the purpose of this type of correspondence was to bring complete and accurate information towards the political center. Its central goal was to collapse distance and difference, bringing everything together under the eyes of senior administrator(s). To that end, government correspondence emphasized witnessing. Forms of address reiterated the hierarchical relationship among governing bodies and officials and provided the recipient with the basis to trust the information the letter contained. The bulk of the letter was then usually devoted to offering an accurate description of events or the situation in question. As such, administrative correspondence made heavy use of a reportorial mode of writing not unlike that of mercantile letters.\textsuperscript{41}

The type of the administrative letter has been explored in some detail by historians of royal administration, though more work has been done on Spain than on France itself. In Spanish domains, the crown mandated a highly regimented, uniform practice of administrative correspondence.\textsuperscript{42} No such state-wide standardization took place in old regime France: efforts by the Ludovician monarchy to require that officials employ standard forms for the most common


\textsuperscript{41} Letters very often relied for this on one of several \textit{procès-verbal}: “Un narré par écrit, dans lequel un Officier de Justice, ou autre ayant droit, rend témoignage de ce qu’il a vu ou entendu.” \textit{Dictionnaire de l’Académie française}, 4th Edition (1762), s.v. \textit{procès}. For an excellent discussion of the process of redaction and redaction, see Jacob Soll, \textit{The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s Secret State Intelligence System} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 89-91.

administrative acts foundered in the face of the kingdom’s legal, governmental and administrative diversity. Yet even though the French crown did not formally standardize administrative practice, a high degree of conformity emerged in practice. Nearly every archive in France holds massive collections of correspondence among government officials, agents and bodies. By the middle of the eighteenth century, at least, these letters displayed a remarkable consistency both graphically and in the type of material they contained.

Administrators made particularly heavy use of two types of letters, which can be roughly described as letters of report and letters of request. Letters of report for the most part offered information about events that had taken place. Into this category can be placed reports from inferior officers to their superiors, letters written by political agents to their clients and correspondence about judicial and administrative affairs. A manual for administrators in the 1790s, which drew on earlier practice, explained that commissioners of the central government were to report “every décade [ten day period] … in detail” on a variety of subjects, including “public spirit, public instruction, [the police], the hospices…epidemics and epizootics, [etc].”

The ideal style for one of these letters was not entirely unlike that of a mercantile letter. Henri de Bouilainvilliers, an important early eighteenth-century scholar of French government and administration, defined the genre negatively in the process of criticizing a memorandum: he chided it for its “dull wordiness, its constant useless digressions, its habit of dealing at great

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44 “chaque decade…par des faits précis” on a variety of subjects, including “l’esprit public, l’instruction publique, la police générale, la police champêtre, la police des cultes, les hospices…établissement de bienfaisance, les épidémies et epizooties [sic]… etc.” Manuel des commissaires du directoire exécutif près les administrations centrales et municipales et près les bureaux centraux… (Paris: Impr. du Dépot des lois, 1799-1800), 113-114.
length with things outside the subject [at hand] and of ignoring those which are essential.” An official letter was supposed to be all that this letter was not: direct, free of digressions, and to deal only with the relevant subject as fully as necessary.

When patriots arrived in Paris as representative or agents of a local administration or club, they quickly began this type of correspondence and maintained them regularly throughout their term of service. After Roland reached Paris as a representative of the city of Lyon in early 1791, he maintained a steady official correspondence with formal bodies back home. From the municipality, he received one letter in April, one in May, five in June, one each in July and August and two in September. There is then a gap in the records, but when they resume in March, 1792, they show that Roland received three letters from the city government that month. The mayor also corresponded from time to time with Roland during this period: in his official capacity, he sent him four letters in March, 1791 and two letters in April of the same year. Roland also maintained ties with the Lyon government with the help of his collaborators. After Champagneux arrived in Paris in May, 1792, he began a regular correspondence with the city government that continued until the end of the year.


47 See 1401 WP 133: Copies des lettres expediees par le maire: registre 23 fev 1791-5 janv 1793. Ibid. There is evidence in the Roland circle’s private letters that Roland corresponded with Vitet more frequently in secret, but these letters have not survived. See, e.g., Roland to Champagneux, 22 aout 1791, N.A.F. 6241.

48 See 1401 WP 036, Archives municipales de Lyon, Lyon.
Representatives averred that reporting on events in Paris was a crucial part of their missions. Georges Couthon, a representative from the Puy-de-Dôme and future member of the Robespierrist Committee of Public Safety, explained in his first letter after arriving in Paris that he would not “tell you about public affairs” since he was “not yet in office, and I must leave to Mr. Gaultier, who is still your representative, all the benefit of corresponding with you.” As soon as he took over his official function, however, Couthon began to write regular reports. Charles Barbaroux, who was dispatched to Paris by the town of Marseille and became a leading Jacobin figure in 1792, opened his first letter to the municipality with a description of his voyage with another representative and an “account of our first steps.” Subsequent letters maintained the reportorial tone: in later February, Barbaroux and his co-representative described the documents they had read at the Jacobins. “Sunday evening,” he wrote, “we read the following at the Jacobins: ….” These similar examples—one from a man who was executed for Girondin sympathies and the other executed for his role as a terrorist—suggest the degree to which these practices were common to all radical patriot leaders.

49 “vous entretenir des affaires publiques;” “point encore en fonction, et je dois laisser à M. Gaultier, qui est encore votre représentant, tout l’avantage de correspondre avec vous.” Couthon to Conseil Général de la Commune de Clermont-Ferrand, 29 sept 1791, Francisque Mège, ed., Correspondance inédite de Georges Couthon, député du Puy-de-Dôme à l’Assemblée législative et à la Convention nationale (1791-1794) (Paris: Aubry, 1872), 27. Even after he became a representative, Couthon temporarily did not maintain his informational correspondence: see below.

50 “récit de nos premières opérations.” Barbaroux and Loys to Municipalité de Marseille, 11 Feb 1792, Charles-Jean-Marie Barbaroux, Correspondance et mémoires de Barbaroux, ed. Claude Perroud and Alfred Chabaud (Paris: Société de l’histoire de la Révolution française, 1923), 58. The word “récit,” both then and now, carried strong connotations of a plain (and at least potentially faithful) account of past events.

Letters of request were the other major form of administrative correspondence between patriot representatives and their home governments. This type of letter had a relatively simple structure: the writer briefly lay out a situation and then asked the correspondent to take action on the particular issue or case at hand. The first sentences of one of the earliest surviving letters from the Lyon municipality to Roland illustrates the point: “We are sending you, Sir and dear colleague,” they wrote, “the extracts of two discussions held the 19th and 21st of this month by the conseil général de la commune…you will find in them the urgent appeals that we are making to the National Assembly….” The characteristically short letter (a mere fourteen lines) continued in this vein. The writers concluded the missive with a formal valediction beginning “please accept [agreer le]….”

As a rule, letters of request dealt with only a single topic at a time. So it was common for a municipality or other government body to dispatch multiple letters on the same day about different topics. Revolutionary governments adopted this practice unchanged from the old regime. For instance, on May 12, 1790, the municipal government of Lyon wrote two letters to their representatives in the National Assembly. The first discussed plans to coin a large supply of money; the second was about Lyon’s “patriotic gift” (don patriotique). In August, 1791, they wrote three letters on the same day to their representatives in Paris: one was about the

52 “Nous vous envoyons, M et chere collegue,” they wrote, “les extraits des deux deliberations pris le 19 et 21 de ce mois par le conseil general de la commune…vous y trouverez les motifs pressants que nous employons aupres de l’assemblee nationale….” Municipality of Lyon to Roland, 24 May 1791, 1401 WP 034, Archives municipales de Lyon, Lyon.

53 1401 WP 032, Archives municipales de Lyon, Lyon.
town’s debt, one about its garrison and one about a proposal to create a salaried National Guard.\footnote{54 Municipality to Roland; Municipality to Deputies; Municipality to Deputies, all 30 Aug 1791, 1401 WP 032, Archives municipales de Lyon, Lyon.}

However, the correspondence of patriot representatives with their constituents was not purely a matter of information-sharing. \textit{Récit} was far from the only literary mode they employed. The patriot leadership conceived of itself as having a didactic role, a responsibility to educate their correspondents and constituents in good patriot principles. Couthon made this clear in his second letter to the municipal government of Clermont-Ferrand: “I have not written to you about public affairs until now; but as your representative and as your fellow citizens, I must give you my opinions in my individual capacity.”\footnote{55 \textit{je me suis dispensé...de vous entretenir jusqu’à présent d’affaires publiques ; mais, comme votre représentant et votre concitoyen, je vous dois compte individuellement de mes opinions.” Couthon to Conseil Général de la Commune de Clermont-Ferrand, 8 oct 1791, Mège, ed., \textit{Correspondance inédite de Couthon}, 28.} Similarly Barbaroux, in his second letter to Marseille, offered an extensive critique of Paris politics, which he summarized with the assertion, widely shared in patriot opinion, that “liberty is always threatened by its enemies. The ministers are traitors; they are planning some sinister plot for the Midi.” “Watch with your usual wisdom over Marseille,” he exhorted by way of conclusion.\footnote{56 \textit{“la liberte est toujours menacée par ses ennemis. Les ministres sont des traîtres; ils préparent quelque explosion funeste du cote du Midi;” “Veillez avec votre sagesse ordinaire sur Marseille,” Barbaroux and Loys to Municipalité de Marseille, 3 Mar 1792, Barbaroux, \textit{Correspondance et mémoires de Barbaroux}, 63.} As Barbaroux suggested in another letter, the correspondence of patriot leaders with clubs was intended to incite the
passions as much as the intellect: its aim, he explained, was to spur the “hearts” of patriots to defend the gains of the Revolution.57

The model for these letters was as much public oratory as it was any particular pre-existing form of formal correspondence.58 Training in public speaking formed a part of the education of most young men in the period: the Jesuits and Oratorians, who educated many of the future radical leaders, placed particular stress on teaching their students the rhetorical arts. In the eighteenth century, the curriculum increasingly emphasized the importance of emotional language and expression as the key to communicating effectively with an audience. Though logic was still seen as being crucial to successful persuasion, inciting an emotional response from the audience was seen as equally important. Indeed, it was the strength of their emotional response—imagined as the more difficult-to-fool faculty—that would confirm for the listeners of the veracity of the speaker’s statements.59

Radical patriot leaders’ correspondences with clubs and municipalities, rich in emotional affect, served to cement bonds of trust between circles of patriots and their provincial power bases. The Lyon clubs, for which records survive starting as early as mid-1791, show that they

57 Ibid., 101. See also the first lines of Robespierre to Société des Amis de la Constitution de Versailles, 13 juin 1791, Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes de Maximilien Robespierre*, 3:110.

58 The only common epistolary form to which they appear to be related was the letter of advice. In one of their modes, this type of letter was intended as a form of public *exemplum*, open for the world to see. But it was uncommon to actually write in this style: exempla by famous men were meant to be read and admired for their clarity and good counsel, not primarily to serve as models for actual letter-writing. Of course, eighteenth-century people did write private letters of advice, especially within families; but these letters were more or less strictly private / personal, and thus did not offer much of a model for the Jacobins’ very public letter writing practices.

repeatedly appealed to the members of the Roland circle for help with their Paris-based business. Already in March, 1791, mere months after the formation of the Club Central, the club minutes show it responding to a letter from Lanthenas in which he reported on “various matters with which the Society had charged him in Paris.”\textsuperscript{60} In June, 1791, the Amis de la Constitution in the section of Croix-Rousse sought to get a hearing for a petition regarding armaments. They decided that “we will address ourselves to citizens Dubon de Cramé, Pétion, and Roland, and to our deputies to the National Assembly, to support our petition.”\textsuperscript{61} The organization of the names, with Roland and the other private individuals appearing first, suggests the higher priority that they gave to trusted individuals than to official representatives. Similarly, when the club of the section of Bellecordière wanted to exchange Lyon’s 6 livre assignats for 5 livre assignats in September, 1791, they appealed to the Club Central to “made a petition through Mr. Lanthenas.”\textsuperscript{62} As late as March, 1792, the patriots of Bellecordière were asking Lanthenas to help them out—in this case, by appealing to Pierre-François Palloy to get them their own stone of the Bastille!\textsuperscript{63}

In a number of cases, the evidence strongly suggests that the clubs trusted their personal acquaintances among the Jacobins more than they did their own official representatives. In

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\textsuperscript{60} “divers objets dont la Société l’avoit chargé pour Paris.” Journal de la Societe populaire des amis de la Constitution, n°18 (17 mars 1791), Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
\textsuperscript{61} “on s’adressera aux citoyens Dubon de Cramé Péttsion, et Rolland, et a nos deputes a l’assemblée nationale pour faire apuyer notre petition.” Séance du 5 juin 1791, 34 L 3: Societe des Amis de la Constitution de Lyon (Section de la Croix-Rousse): deliberations, AD Rhone, Lyon.
\textsuperscript{62} “faire petititon sur la voix de M Lantenas.” Séance du 25 sept 1791, 34 L 1: Societe des Amis de la Constitution de Lyon (Section Bellecordiere): deliberations, Archives départementales du Rhone, Lyon.
\textsuperscript{63} 18 mars 1792, Ibid.
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November, 1791, the Lyon clubs were trying to gain the withdrawal of the troops that had been sent into the city in the wake of the flight to Varennes. Late in the month, the members of the Bellecordière club received a letter from citizen Portailler, one of the city’s supplements to the National Assembly. He reported that their petition for a withdrawal of the troops would have “no effect, if we only solicit the members of the National Assembly named by the electors of our municipality.” As a result, the club decided to ask the Club Central to appeal to Lanthenas to “have the address read to the Jacobins of Paris in open meeting” in order to get them to support the petition to the Assembly.64

In return for their support and help, the clubs supported their former members now in Paris in both elections and political conflicts. The Lyon clubs advanced Roland and others for election to both municipal and national office. In November, 1791, when the Lyon municipality was up for reelection, the Bellecordière club put Roland first on its list of “individuals worthy of their confidence to have a position in the municipal government.”65 Nor were they the only ones. The Richard brothers reported to Lanthenas that after the clubs decided to make up electoral lists, “we had the pleasure to find J.M. Roland, Vitet, mayor, on almost all the lists.”66 Roland himself added that he was “listed among the first on almost all the lists.”67

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64 “aucun effet, si on ne sollicite les membres de l’assemblée nationale nommés par les électeurs de notre municipalité.” As a result, the club decided to ask the Club Central to appeal to Lanthenas to “faire lecture d’une adresse seance tenante de la société de Jacobins de Paris” 30 nov 1791, Ibid.

65 sujets digne de leur confiance d’occuper place a la municipalité.” Séance du 11 nov 1791, Ibid.

66 “On y avoit proposé à tous les clubs de désigner les candidats pr la prochaine législative. Sur presque toutes les listes, nous avons eu le plaisir de voir j.m. Roland, vitet, maire.” Frères Richard to Lanthenas, 25 aout 1791, N.A.F. 9534.

67 “porté des premiers sur presque toutes les listes.” Roland to Bancal, 3 sept 1791, Ibid.
clubs’ loyalty extended even to supporting their own representatives and former members against other leading patriots. When Robespierre made a speech opposing the formation of the second patriot ministry, including Roland, the Bellecordonière club brusquely announced that it would not support the publication of the speech. Instead, “the society gives its support to printing the discourse of Mr. Roland de la Platière.”

When the Roland circle was expelled from the Jacobins later that year, the Le Puy club voted to reconsider its Jacobin affiliation. As part of its deliberations, it wrote to the Paris Jacobins to “state the surprise and dissatisfaction over the fact that [the Club] had expelled citizens who enjoyed public favor such as Roland, Lanthenas and Brissot,” while keeping such “factieux” and “agitators” as Marat, Robespierre and Danton in the club.

The patriot leadership’s shift to Paris in 1791 and 1792 had unintended consequences for its epistolary habits and for the nature of sociability within the patriot movement. As they increasingly became official representatives of governments and patriot clubs in Paris, the individuals associated with the Paris Jacobins began writing more and more administrative and club correspondence. Though these types of letters differed from each other in a number of ways—not least in their openness to affective rhetoric—they shared a common root in forms of public and official speaking and writing. They offered little of the rich possibility for dialogue and debate that had been a foundational element of the private correspondences that patriot leaders exchanged between Paris and the provinces during the first years of the Revolution.

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68 “La société donne son adhésion pour faire imprimer le discours de Mr Rolland de La platiere.” 24 mai 1792, 34 L 1, AD Rhone, Lyon.

new epistolary practices helped to effect a hardening or institutionalization of the patriot
leadership’s power—and tied the individual Jacobin leaders ever more tightly to their local
power bases.

**Rethinking the Jacobins’ fatal split**

Though the radical patriot leadership had split before, and would split again several more
times thereafter, the Girondin-Montagnard scission of 1792 was the most consequential of these
internal divisions. It set the stage for the first fratricidal violence within the patriot leadership—
the outlawing and then execution of the Girondins in 1793—and so opened the floodgates for the
broader application of violence among self-proclaimed patriots during the year of the Terror.70

Interpretations of this split have fallen into two broad camps: those who see it as the product of
deep, irreconcilable differences and those who identify it as emerging from something (ideology
or political power) held in common. After briefly analyzing this historiography, I suggest that
letter writing practices and the concept of sociability more broadly provide a new way of
thinking about the causes of split which combines insights from several corners of the
historiographic debate. The Jacobin factions, I suggest, did share something important: a
fragmented sociability, shaped in part by their shared practices of correspondence. In the

70 One can make a strong case for the idea that the execution of the king was the crucial turning
point in the revolutionaries’ move towards violence. For a recent statement of this position, see
Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French
Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 154ff. Yet the king had never been
close with the radical patriot leadership that rose to power in 1792; indeed, they were intensely
suspicious of him as a remnant of the old order. Their decision to execute him was consistent
with the patriots’ longstanding anti-aristocratic rhetoric. The attack on a group of fellow patriots,
who had even been Jacobins in good standing, marked a turn towards a truly fratricidal violence
which is more difficult to explain. For Hannah Arendt, this turn—not the attack on the person of
the king—was the decisive step in the radicalization of violence in the Revolution.
crucible of revolutionary paranoia and fear in 1792, this fragmented sociability left the patriot leaders with few tools for building trust across factional lines.

The earliest scholarly work on the Girondins, by Alphone Aulard and his disciples at the turn of the twentieth century, saw the split as a consequence of radical patriots’ different reactions to changing political circumstances in 1791 and 1792. Aulard argued that as far as their basic principles went, Girondins and Montagnards were virtually indistinguishable: indeed, his considered judgment was that “in reading their speeches, their pamphlets, their newspapers, one can find almost no difference in culture or ideals.”71 The “real reason for the dispute” between them, he argued, was a disagreement about whether Paris ought to have a special role in leading the Revolution (Girondins said no; Montagnards said yes).72 In this interpretation, the split was not only a contingent result of the Revolution’s development but also a direct product of the rivals’ nearly identical role in revolutionary politics. Aulard’s rival on the left, Albert Mathiez, took the opposite view. The Girondin and Montagnard “parties,” he wrote, had “radically different conceptions of all the essential problems.”73 Unlike Aulard, moreover, Mathiez believed that these differences were rooted in the different social origins and economic interests of the two groups: the Girondins were wealthier and more closely allied with capital

71 Alphonse Aulard, *Histoire politique de la Révolution française* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1901), 395. Several of his disciples, including Claude Perroud and Francisque Mége, devoted substantial parts of their careers to collecting and publishing the writings of leading members of the group.

72 Ibid., 402.

than the Montagnards. The split in the Jacobins, in his view, was overdetermined by the different class bases of the factions.

Mathiez’s interpretation, with some admixtures of Aulard’s views, remained the standard account of the split until the publication of M. J. Sydenham’s *The Girondins* (1961). Sydenham attacked Mathiez on all fronts: he argued that the Girondins were not an organized party, and certainly not one based on shared economic interest. They were simply a set of overlapping groups of friends, “interested in politics before the Revolution,” who “continued and extended their association in active political life during the days of the National Assembly.” Indeed, Sydenham went even further: in his view, the Girondin-Montagnard split was a “legend,” an invention of Jacobin propaganda during the Terror that had no strong basis in historical fact.

Though *The Girondins* dispatched the pure socio-economic interpretation of the split, most historians were unwilling to abandon the idea (originating with Mathiez) that the Girondin-Montagnard split emerged from some profound underlying difference in outlook. So they tried to develop new grounds on which to draw the line between the two camps. From the 1960s through the 1980s, most scholars looked to ideological differences as the dividing line. The most prolific scholar in this vein was Marcel Dorigny, who produced a massive bibliography of articles on the intellectual background and political practice of the Girondins. For Dorigny, the

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74 See Ibid., 2:8-9 and Albert Mathiez, *Girondins et Montagnards* ([Paris]: Firmin-Didot, 1930), 7-10 and 21-32. The latter pages, which are a comparison of Vergniaud and Robespierre, use character sketches to paint a rough portrait of the putative class differences between the Girondins and Montagnards.


76 Ibid., 20-28 and 207-209. This part of Sydenham’s argument has been quite influential. Even Albert Soboul, the successor to Mathiez at the Institut d’Histoire de la Révolution Francaise admitted that “Girondins et Montagnards n’ayant jamais constitué de partis organisés et disciplines.” Soboul, “Introduction” in Albert Soboul, ed. *Girondins et Montagnards : actes du colloque, Sorbonne, 14 décembre 1975* (Paris: Société des études robesspierristes, 1980).
Girondins were distinguished primarily by their embrace of liberal political and economic thought. Several essays in François Furet and Mona Ozouf’s influential collection, *La Gironde et les Girondins*, suggested on the other hand that Girondins and Montagnards differed primarily in their willingness to engage in extra-parliamentary politics.

But although the scholarship on Girondin ideology revealed a great deal about the ideas and political culture of individual Girondins, what it has not done is provide a compelling account of why they split so acrimoniously from the Montagnards in 1791-1792. The ideological differences that Dorigny and others observed are quite fine—so fine, in fact, as to make the split in the Jacobins more rather than less puzzling. Indeed, if anything, this research has paradoxically confirmed Aulard’s interpretation: in spite of disagreements around the margins, it appears that he was correct in saying that Girondins and Montagnards shared an intellectual culture and a set of political values. This interpretation has also been buttressed by rigorous statistical work showing that it is virtually impossible to distinguish the two groups on the basis of their voting patterns in the assemblies.

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79 Sydenham began this process in *The Girondins*: he argued that the roll call votes and lists of suspects that had been used to draw up lists of Girondins in fact proved little about the existence of a party. See Sydenham, Ch. 3. Rigorous statistical work by Alison Patrick, though differing on a number of important details, largely confirmed Sydenham’s findings: see Alison Patrick, “Political Divisions in the French National Convention, 1792-93,” *The Journal of Modern History* 41, no. 4 (Dec., 1969): 467-468. See also Michael Lewis-Beck, Anne Hildreth and Alan
For the past twenty years or so, a number of scholars have begun to explain the Girondin-Montagnard split by looking at elements of the shared culture and ideology of the Jacobin movement. In particular, these scholars have suggested that the Girondin-Montagnard split was just one manifestation of a broader tendency towards factionalism and internecine conflict within the ideology of the Jacobin movement—a tendency in dialectical balance with the movement’s equally deep commitment to unity and homogeneity in both social and political dimensions.

Most recently, scholars have suggested that Jacobin concepts of friendship, sociability and the family themselves were in part to blame for the factionalist ethos of the Jacobins. This explanation is satisfying both because it avoids the need to divide Girondins from Montagnards before the split—an anachronistic division of Jacobins from Jacobins—and because it avoids the intellectual hair-splitting that was necessary in order to argue that the factions split because of fundamental ideological differences.

It may be, however, that it was not just a shared Jacobin ideology that brought about the scission between the Girondins and the Montagnards, but also a shared set of social practices. As we have seen in the first sections of this chapter, the epistolary practices of the Jacobin leadership helped to fracture it both within Paris and on a national scale by the beginning of 1792. Billet culture, with its emphasis on familiar relationships and lack of formal epistolary

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ceremonial, was well suited to reinforcing pre-existing bonds of friendship but unsuitable for building bonds between circles. The formal correspondences that did exist among the circles, limited as they were, served mostly to reinforce the sense of social and political distance that separated the Jacobin factions from one another, not to bring them together. As the patriot party found itself increasingly concentrated in Paris over the course of 1791, these practices reinforced the social, intellectual and political divisions that had arisen contingently—perhaps in some cases even at random—among radical patriots.

The idea that practices of correspondence and sociability played an important role in creating divisions within the Jacobin leadership is confirmed by the fact that both Girondins and Montagnards wielded epistolary practices as evidence of the other side’s perfidy in late 1792 and 1793. Montagnards regularly accused their opponents of being engaged in secret correspondence with counter-revolutionaries. The exact individuals with whom they were accused of contacting shifted over time. In 1792, future Montagnards usually cited Lafayette, who had been a leader in the Feuillant movement in the latter part of 1791, as the Girondins’ chief co-conspirator. In his 1792 screed, *Jacques-Pierre Brissot démasqué*, the then-Robespierrist Camille Desmoulins made Brissot’s “relations with Lafayette” a crucial part of the proof of Brissot’s duplicitous nature. He accused him of “dealing with Coblentz and the

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81 My argument here is distinct from that in Carla Hesse, “La preuve par la lettre : pratiques juridiques au tribunal révolutionnaire de Paris (1793-1794),” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 51, no. 3 (1996). She argues that Jacobins believed that private correspondence offered a unique, privileged window into the writer’s mind, which made it particularly useful for prosecuting crimes which were defined in terms of the perpetrator’s intentions. I argue that the structures of sociability fostered by correspondence among the Jacobin leadership contributed to their internal divisions.
Austrian Committee."82 “But Brissot, by chance doesn’t he want to give us the [kind of] Republic which he agreed upon with Lafayette?,” demanded a Montagnard deputy in the Convention along similar lines.83 Defending himself in the Jacobin club again the accusations, Brissot summarized the two most serious charges thus: “So what are my crimes? They say I created the ministers; that I maintain a correspondence with La Fayette and Condorcet.”84 In early 1793, after Dumouriez defected to the Austrians, his “close connections” with the Rolands and Brissot became the target of Montagnard ire.85

Montagnards repeatedly accused their opponents of holding secret and thus illegitimate (or at least questionable) meetings with one another. Ironically, it was Guffroy, Robespierre’s friend from Arras and frequent correspondent, who accused the Girondins of meeting in private. The “principal machinations are orchestrated by the men of the Gironde, who concert with Brissot, Louvet, Gorsas and others who meet at the Rolands’.”86 At another point, Guffroy offered a virtual (albeit completely false) map of the Girondins’ sociability:

82 “rapports avec Lafayette” a crucial part of the proof of Brissot’s duplicitous nature. He accused him of having “intelligence avec Coblentz et le comité autrichien.” Camille Desmoulins, Jacques-Pierre Brissot démasqué (Paris, 1792), 53 and 55.

83 “Mais Brissot par hasard, ne voudrait-il pas nous donner la République dont il était convenu avec Lafayette.” Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860; recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises, (Paris), 56:449.


86 “machinations principales sont dirigées par des hommes du département de la Gironde, qui coalises avec Brissot, Louvet, Gorsas et autres se réunissent chez Roland.” Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860; recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises, 56:449.
What’s more, I am told that Pétion, the close friend of Brissot, Condorcet et Brulard-Silléry, I am told, I say, that Pétion traveled to England at the end of the Constituent Assembly with the children of the former Duc d’Orléans; I think I can prove that Pétion, as mayor of Paris, received Philippe-Egalité [Orléans] at his home, at night, by way of a rear door; Brûlard-Silléry is closely linked to Pétion and Brissot; many of our colleagues know and will testify that about fifteen days ago (in December, 1792), Brûlard-Silléry held a dinner for fifteen or twenty deputies, who usually sit by Buzot, Brissot, Barbaroux; and we know moreover that the children of Philippe-Egalité had Silléry’s wife as their teacher. There, I think, are enough links to give grounds for my suspicions.87

As Guffroy reiterated, one could hardly imagine a more incriminating set of connections—if they were indeed true. What’s more, they were connections that were most likely sustained by practices of billet-writing and its attendant practices of sociability. They made this linkage explicit during the interrogation of Mme Brissot in 1793. She was asked about the “nature of Brissot’s correspondences with Roland [and] his wife” and about Roland’s “correspondence with Pétion and other imprisoned and fugitive deputies.” Mme Roland denied any knowledge of such correspondences. This was disingenuous, as both her interrogators and later generations have

87 “D’ailleurs on m’assure que Pétion, intime de Brissot, de Condorcet et de Brulard-Silléry, on m’a assuré, dis-je, que Pétion, à la fin de l’Assemblée constituant avait fait un voyage en Angleterre (2), avec les enfants du ci-devant duc d’Orléans; je pense prouver que Pétion, étant maire de Paris, recevait Philippe-Egalité chez lui, le soir, par une porte de derrière; Brûlard-Silléry est intimement lié avec Pétion et Brissot; plusieurs de nos collègues savent et déposeront qu’il y a quinze jours (en décembre 1792) environ , Brûlard-Silléry donnait à dîner à quinze ou vingt députés, qui siègent habituellement du côté des Buzot, Brissot, Barbaroux; et l’on sait enfin que les enfants de Philippe-Egalité ont eu la femme de Silléry pour institutrice. Voilà, je pense, des rapprochements suffisants pour fonder mes soupçons.” Ibid., 56:450.
known. Yet her willingness to so baldly deny the truth suggests the danger that she thought there was in admitting that such a questionable “factional” correspondence was in fact taking place.88

All the while, Robespierre and his allies vigorously denied that they were part of any social grouping whatsoever. “I have absolutely no role, either directly nor indirectly, in the denunciations made here by Messrs. Collot, Merlin and Chabot: I swear them as witnesses, I swear all of those who know me; and I swear by the fatherland and by liberty; my views on everything which has to do with this matter is independent, isolated,” protested Robespierre in the spring of 1792.89 Over a year later, in October 1793, during the trial of the Girondins, Chabot expatiated on his refusal to join the Brissotin group. He claimed to have responded to an invitation by asserting that he did not “wish to recognize any meeting other than that at the Jacobins…We have the people on our side, we must act openly.”90 Of course, these repeated denials that they formed a faction suggest both the Montagnards’ fear that they would be accused of the same and perhaps their sense that the accusation would not be unjust. Brissot and his allies certainly thought it had merit. In his response to being expelled from the Jacobins, Brissot

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88 “nature des correspondances de Brissot avec Roland ou avec sa femme;”

89 “Je n’ai eu aucune espèce de part, ni directement ni indirectement, aux dénonciations faites ici par MM. Collot, Merlin et Chabot: je les en atteste eux-mêmes; j’en atteste tous ceux qui me connaissent; et je le jure par la Patrie et par la Liberté; mon opinion sur tout ce qui tient à cet objet est indépendante, isolée,” Réponse de M. Robespierre aux discours de MM. Brissot et Guadet du 23 avril 1792, prononcée à la Société des Amis de la Constitution le 27 du même mois, et imprimée par ordre de la Société (27 avril 1792).

asserted that his “true crime” was being unwilling to bend to the “dictatorship of Robespierre and his protectors and protégés.”

As Brissot knew perhaps better than anyone, the split in the Jacobins was about much more than just a quarrel over friendship and patronage. The leading Jacobins disagreed vigorously during the last year of the French monarchy about crucial political and policy questions, from the advisability of declaring war on Europe to the wisdom of executing the king. Yet their differences, though deeply felt and forcefully expressed, were still disagreements within the patriot party itself—indeed, among the smallest group of the most radical patriots. Though such comparisons are perilous, the Jacobin factions appear to have been far closer to one another in their principles than either the American patriots in 1774 or the Dutch patriots on the eve of their defeat. The question that faces us, then, is why the Jacobins proved unable to resolve or even manage those differences of opinion. Part of the explanation, this chapter has suggested, lay in the way that the Jacobins’ rise to power and attendant changes in letter-writing practices had simultaneously heightened the movement’s internal divisions while robbing the leadership of the means to engage in frank internal discussions away from the public eye. Without those conversations, even the relatively small differences of opinion that separated one group of patriot leaders from another could spiral downward into public dispute, mutual hostility, and even violence.

Just over five decades ago, R. R. Palmer published the first volume of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*. It had a one-page preface and no conclusion. The second volume, published five years later, also had a one-page preface and no conclusion. Palmer certainly knew a thing or two about comparative history, so perhaps there is a lesson in that for the comparativist faced with the challenge of writing a conclusion. More than many other kinds of history, comparison is a collaboration with the reader, an effort to work out the meaning of juxtaposed histories. What appears to the author to be a significant point of difference among cases may seem less important for a reader. And what one reader sees as a telling point of similarity may seem less striking or entirely unremarkable to another. Indeed, juxtapositions invite such disagreement, since setting two things alongside each other does not by itself force one to see any particular relationship between them.

“Corresponding Republics” has tried to bring together the histories of three revolutions which are often mentioned together but rarely studied as one. And though they have been defined in opposition to one another, the similarities that appear when the American, Dutch and French Revolutions are put alongside one another are extensive. In each case, patriot leaders relied on private political correspondence to organize themselves and their movements. These political correspondences took their form in good measure from non-political pre-revolutionary epistolary styles. Patriot leaders’ jerry-rigged private political networks in turn intersected and overlapped with more public media, from club correspondences to pamphlets and newspapers, helping to structure the wider revolutionary public sphere. Perhaps more important than their public function, however, was the letters’ private role. In each case, patriot leaders employed
their private correspondence as a means to create themselves as revolutionary subjects and to adapt those self-constructions to new political needs as the revolutionary movements evolved and grew.

These shared processes of political organizing, specific to the late eighteenth century and crucial to all three of the revolutionary movements in question, give new grounds for considering these revolutions together—in spite of their undoubted differences—as components of a broader age of revolution. Yet the revolutionary era that emerges from “Corresponding Republics” looks different from the dominant picture of revolutionary politics in recent scholarship. One of the most distinctive qualities of the eighteenth-century revolutions, certainly by comparison with nineteenth-century mass politics, was the degree to which they were organized and managed by a relatively small coterie of elite patriot leaders. Most academic research since the 1980s has emphasized the importance of the public sphere in revolutionary politics and underlined the creation of new if imperfect democratic polities as its key achievement. By recovering the role played by private correspondence networks and practices, “Corresponding Republics” seeks to shift the pendulum back towards an appreciation of the role played by private action—while at the same time applying to elite organizing the sophisticated analytic and theoretical tools that have been used to such good effect in studying the public sphere.

Variations within the shared framework of private organizing through correspondence can also help us understand the significant differences in process and outcome among the three revolutions in question. The most important variation that I identity is the different forms of letter-writing on which patriot leaders based their revolutionary political correspondence. Patriot leaders drew on their pre-revolutionary experience as letter writers, adapting the forms of correspondence that they used most often in their distinct socio-professional milieux. So
American patriots turned to mercantile forms of letter writing, the Dutch to forms of courtly and familiar correspondence, and the French radical patriots to scholarly styles. These modes of letter writing, each with its own conventions and norms, profoundly influenced the kinds of national communities that patriot leaders were able to build. The extent and shape of their networks, the degree to which they permitted expressions of emotion or debate and discussion, how the letters could be used—the patriot leaders’ different epistolary heritage helped give shape to all of these aspects of their revolutionary correspondence. The forms helped to craft patriots’ revolutionary subjectivity (which was closely tied in to their correspondence) into certain shapes. And old regime forms affected not only their exchanges with one another and their self-fashioning but also the kinds of relations they were able to create with popular clubs and patriot societies: each kind of correspondence created a more or less open communication between elites and clubs, and greater or lesser possibilities for coordinated action.

The differences in the epistolary communities that patriots built may in turn help to explain some of the well-known differences in the outcomes of the three revolutions in question. In the American case, the habits of mercantile correspondence helped to produce the broad but manifestly fragile political consensus within the patriot leadership. This consensus helped the American patriots successfully form a republican polity, and to do so without much violence, but it left them with profound disagreements to resolve in the 1790s and after. The Dutch patriots’ courtly letter-writing practices produced a patriot movement which was far more hierarchical than that of the American colonists—which contributed to the movement’s crumbling and collapse in 1786 and 1787. For the radical patriots in France, their inheritance of scholarly correspondence proved to be both a blessing and a curse. It enabled them to build a national community of patriot leaders that achieved a far higher degree of intellectual and affective unity
than anything which the American patriot movement was able to muster. These qualities helped the patriot leadership maintain a high level of control over patriot clubs and, like the Americans before them, successfully marshal them in a national plan to take power. Yet in the crucible of 1792, that unity of purpose and the patriots’ tightly knit network turned out to be a liability, preventing them from resolving or even discussing the differences of opinion that divided them.

By showing how differences in the way each patriot movement wrote to and about itself helped to create very different revolutionary dynamics and outcomes, “Corresponding Republics” contributes to forging an anti-exceptionalist history of the revolutionary era. Too often, the differences among the revolutionary movements have been ascribed to purported pseudo-national differences in political ideology, social structure, or old regime governance. And those differences, more often than not, have been rendered in moral terms in order to make one revolution out to be “good” and another “bad.” But the differences in epistolary practice among the various patriot movements were not the product of national differences. Indeed, quite to the contrary: the letter forms they adopted were all branches of a shared Atlantic letter-writing culture. The fact that patriots in a given region adopted a particular mode of letter-writing with which to build their political networks was a highly contingent product of circumstances with no moral implications. The patriots made their revolutions, to be sure, but they did not do so under the conditions of their own making. Letter writing practices, the circumstances “given and transmitted from the past,” helped to make each of the revolutions—and they made each one in a different image.
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284 AP: Archives Sieyès
446 AP: Papiers Brissot
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AF II 53, doss 393: Détails des lettres et paquets venues d’Amérique, 1793
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D XIX: Comité ecclésiastique
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Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France, Paris
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1 L 258-261 & 369-371: Administration du département
2 L 43 & 50: Administration du district de Lyon-Ville
34 L: Sociétés populaires

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3 J 9-18: Société populaire du Puy
L 860 (old classification): Période révolutionnaire
2 L 65, 66, 67, 71, 80 (new classification): Période révolutionnaire
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D 13 1: Correspondence (enregistrements), 24 dec 1785-11 aout 1791
D 31 1: Déliberations, 21 sept 1790-21 vend V
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H 161: Garde Nationale
I 12: Liste des membres de la société populaire du Puy
I 13: Sociétés et clubs politiques étrangers à la commune. 2 juin 1790-12 brumaire III
I 16: Contre-Révolution ouverte: Projet [Société populaire]
I 30: Société populaire du Puy, désaccord avec Reynaud et municipalité

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4469: Documents, 1791-92
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II)
36: Recueil de documents, 1790-An VII
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12 II 2: Archives privées – Fonds Louis Chaine (1790-93)
657 WP 001: Administration de la commune. Minutes de la correspondance de
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Fonds Paul le Blanc
906: Société populaire de Champeix – proces verbaux.
1311: Documents de la période révolutionnaire: 1789-an X. Brioude.
1371: Révolution en Auvergne: documents divers, pièces originales, copies, etc.
1179: lettre de J.H. Bancal, an VII, folios 230-231
87: Correspondance des frères Ranchoup, 1702-1793.

Great Britain

Add Mss 27811-27817: Papers of the London Corresponding Society
Add Mss 30867-30876: General Correspondence of John Wilkes
Add Mss 41262-41267: Papers of Thomas Clarkson

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Gemeentearchief Amsterdam, Amsterdam
Familiearchief Bicker

Gelders Archief, Arnhem
Familiearchief Van der Capellen

Nationaal Archief, The Hague
Collectie Dumont-Pigalle
PA Van Hooff
PA Van de Spiegel
Collectie Daendels
Collectie Wiselius
PA Dassevael
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Familiearchief Van Slingelandt - de Vrij Temminck
Collectie Cornelius de Gijselaar
Collectie C.W.F. Dumas

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New York Public Library, New York, N.Y.
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Boston Committee of Correspondence Papers
Connecticut Papers, 1759-1776
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  John Lamb Papers
  Alexander McDougall Papers

  William Palfrey Papers
  Arthur Lee Papers
  Jared Sparks Papers

Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass.
  Miscellaneous Bound Documents
  Jeremy Belknap Papers
  Dana Family Papers
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Journal de la Societe populaire des amis de la Constitution (Lyon)
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