1. No. 354; 20 Jun. not found.

2. Joshua Loring (1716-81) was born in Boston and rose through the ranks of the Royal Navy in America. He was made a commodore during the French and Indian War and appointed the British naval commander on the Great Lakes. War wounds had cost him a leg, and he would soon retire on half-pay to his fine mansion at Jamaica Plain. The mansion, which is still standing, was then within the bounds of the town of Roxbury, since incorporated in municipal Boston.

3. Henry Seymour Conway (1721-95) was a career soldier and former field marshal. He was an MP for five constituencies in the course of more than forty years in Parliament. He served as secretary of state for the Southern Dept. Jul. 1765-May 1766, and was leader of the House of Commons in the Rockingham administration, Jul. 1765 to Jan. 1768.

368 | To the Board of Trade

Castle William, Aug' 15, 1765.

My Lords,

I am extremely concerned that I am obliged to give your Lordships the Relation that is to follow; as it will reflect disgrace upon this Province, & bring the Town of Boston under great difficulties. Two or three months ago, I thought that this People would have submitted to the Stamp Act without actual Opposition: Murmurs indeed were continually heard; but they seemed to be such as would in time dye away. But the publishing the Virginia Resolves, proved an Alarm bell to the disaffected: from that time an infamous weekly Paper, which is printed here, has swarmed with Libells of the most atrocious kind. These have been urged with so much Vehemence, & so industriously repeated, that I have considered them as Preludes to Action. But I did not think that it would have commenced so early, or be carried to such Lengths as it has been.

Yesterday Morning at break of day, was discovered hanging upon a tree, in a street of the Town, an Effigy with inscriptions, showing that it was intended to represent M' Oliver the Secretary, who had lately accepted the Office of Stamp Distributor. Some of the Neighbours offered to take it down; but they were given to know that would not be permitted. Many Gentlemen, especially some of the Council, treated it as a boyish sport, that did not deserve the Notice of the Governor & Council. But I did not think so: however I contented myself with the Lt Gov'; as chief Justice, directing the Sheriff to order his Officers to take down the Effigy: & I appointed a Council to meet in the Afternoon to consider what should be done, if the Sheriff’s Officers were obstructed in removing the Effigy.

Before the Council met, the Sheriff reported, that his Officers had endeavoured to take down the Effigy; but could not do it without imminent danger of their Lives. The Council met: I represented this Transaction to them as the beginning, in my
Opinion, of much greater Commotions; & desired their Advice what I should do upon this Occasion. A Majority of the Council spoke in form against doing anything; but upon very different Principles. Some said, that it was a trifling Business, which, if let alone, would subside of itself; but if taken notice of, would become a serious Affair. Others said, that it was a serious Affair already; that it was a preconcerted Business in which the greatest Part of the Town was engaged; that we had no force to oppose to it; & making an Opposition to it without a power to support the Opposition would only inflame the People, & be a means of extending the mischief to persons not at present the Objects of it. Tho’ the Council were allmost unanimous in advising that nothing should be done, they were averse to having such advice entered upon the Council Book. But I insisted upon their giving me an Answer to my Question, & that it should be entered in the Book: when after a long altercation, it was avoided by their advising me to order the Sheriff to assemble the Peace Officers, & preserve the Peace: which I immediately ordered, being a matter of form rather than of real Significance.

It now grew dark; when the Mob which had been gathering all the Afternoon, came down to the Town House, bringing the Effigy with them; & knowing that we were sitting in the Council Chamber, they gave three huzza’s by way of defiance, & passed on. From thence they went to a new Building, lately erected by M’ Oliver to let out for Shops, & not quite finished: this they called the Stamp Office, & pulled it down to the Ground in five minutes. From thence they went to M’ Oliver’s House, before which they beheaded the Effigy, & broke all the Windows next the Street; then they carried the Effigy to Fort hill near M’ Oliver’s House, where they burnt the Effigy in a Bonfire made of the Timber they had pulled down from the Building. M’ Oliver had removed his family from his House, & remained himself with a few friends; when the Mob returned to attack the House. M’ Oliver was prevailed upon to retire, & his friends kept Possession of the House. The Mob finding the Doors barricaded, broke down the whole fence of the Garden towards fort hill, & coming on beat in all the doors & windows of the Garden front, & entered the House, the Gentlemen there retiring. As soon as they had got possession, they searched about for M’ Oliver, declaring they would kill him: finding that he had left the House, a Party set out to search two neighbouring Houses, in one of which M’ Oliver was; but happily they were diverted from this Pursuit by a Gentleman telling them, that M’ Oliver was gone with the Governor to the Castle: Otherwise he would certainly have been murdered. After 11 o’clock, the Mob seeming to grow quiet, The (L’ Gov’.) Chief Justice & the Sheriff ventured to go to M’ Oliver’s House to endeavour to perswade them to disperse. As soon as they began to speak, a Ring leader cried out “The Governor & the Sheriff! to your Arms my boys.” Presently after a volley of stones followed; & the two Gentlemen narrowly escaped thro’ favour of the Night, not without some bruises. I should have mentioned before, that I sent a written order
to the Colonel of the Regiment of Militia, to beat an Alarm; he answered that it would signify nothing, for as soon as the drum was heard, the drummer would be knocked down, & the drum broke; he added, that probably all the drummers of the Regiment were in the Mob. Nothing more being to be done, The Mob were left to disperse at their own Time, which they did about 12 o’clock.

The next day I called a Council, having summoned all the Members within 10 Miles of Boston. I asked their advice in general, & particularly recommended to them, the Protection of M’ Olivers House & Family from further Attacks. They lamented the Impotence of the Government, & said that it would be to no purpose to attempt to raise a Military Force; as the Militia, the only force we had, would never act against the Rioters, if they would assemble at all, which was much doubted. All that was advised therefore, was to issue a Proclamation for discovering the Offenders, promising a reward, &c, & to convene the Justices of the Peace, & the select Men of the Town, & recommend to them, that they would use all the Means in their Power to preserve the peace of the Town. I accordingly issued the Proclamation immediately as is inclosed; & having convened the Justices of the Peace, & the Select Men into the Council Chamber, I there earnestly exhorted them to use all means in their Power to preserve the Peace; which they promised to do. Having taken all other necessary Measures for preventing Mischief in the ensuing Evening, I went at Sunset to the Castle; where I immediately set down to give your Lordships this information, expecting a Ship to sail for England to morrow. Whilst I am writing, looking towards Boston, I saw a Bonfire burning on Fort hill: by which I understand that the Mob is up, & probably doing mischief. I shall therefore discontinue this Letter till I can receive Information of what is done this night.

August, 16th.

I have now an Account from Boston, that tho’ the Mob was up, yet no mischief was done last Evening, to account for which, I must go back a little before it.

In the Afternoon of Yesterday, sevral Gentlemen applied to M’ Oliver, to advise him to make a publick declaration, that he would resign the Office, & never act in it; without which they said, his House would be immediately destroyed, & his Life in continual Danger. Upon which he was obliged to authorise some Gentlemen to declare in public, that he would immediately apply for leave to resign, & would not act in the Office, (as indeed it was impossible for him to do) untill he received further Orders. This satisfied the Leaders; but the lower Part of the Mob were not so easily pacified. They accordingly prepared a bonfire on Fort hill, & designed, as I have been informed, to pull down M’ Olivers House that Night. Towards the Night, the Justices & Select Men went upon fort hill, & harangued the People assembled there, told them that M’ Oliver had resigned the Stamp Office, & had given satisfaction to all Persons concerned upon that account. The Mob were very incredulous, or
perhaps they were unwilling to lose their Frolick: However, they were prevailed upon
to disperse. Soon after they assembled again, & renewed their bonfire; but proper
Persons being employed to talk with them, they were prevented from doing any more
mischief. Afterwards they went to the Lieut. Governors, called for him to come out,
assuring him that if he did, he should receive no harm. But the People within denying
that he was at home, & the neighbours interposing, they went off without doing any
Mischief. Afterwards they went to the Province House, & asked for me: my People
answering that I was at the Castle, they gave three Huzza's, & went away. The abettors
of them say, that these Visits were designed only to desire me & the L't Gov't to write
home to get the Stamp Act repealed; but for my Part, I am glad I was excused a
Personal interview with them, as they were, as I am told, the lowest of the Mob. Thus
Matters stand now; & I am told these troubles are like to subside for the present.

Every one agrees that this riot has exceeded all others known here, both in the
Vehemence of Action & mischiefousness of intention: & never had any Mob so
many abettors of Consequence as this is supposed to have had. It is said there were
50 Gentlemen Actors in this Scene disguised with trousers & Jackets on, besides
a much larger Number behind the Curtain. It is said also, that these disguised
Gentlemen proceeded no farther than the burning the Effigy, & then departed,
& had no hand in storming the House: & it is certain that many Gentlemen, who
approved of hanging & burning the Effigy, took the Pains the next day to prevent
any further Mischief being done to M't Oliver or his House. But the common talk of
the Town is, that the Stamp Act shall not be executed here; that a Man who offers a
stamped Paper to sell, will be immediately killed; that all the power of Great Britain
shall not oblige them to submit to the Stamp Act; that they will die upon the Place
first, &c, &c. These & many other sayings such like, I continually hear of at second
hand: Some time ago I despised them; but now they become too serious. In truth, it
will be impossible to attempt to carry the Act into execution, untill fresh Orders &
Powers shall come from England. It seems that this Commotion entirely arose out
of the Town of Boston: it was given out that many People out of the Country were
concerned in this Affair, but upon Enquiry I find, that such persons living out of
Boston, as were seen in the Crowd, were there merely as Spectators.

Hitherto I have had no share in this resentment: in the many libells that preceded
this insurrection, nothing was pointed at me; during the whole disturbance, no
personal insult was directed at me; Even my Proclamation gave no Offence, as it
was considered as a form of Government: but I have been given to understand, that
if I was to attempt to carry my Proclamation into execution, I should soon become
an Object of Popular resentment myself. Indeed I am so utterly unable to oppose or
correct an insurrection of this kind, that it would be the highest folly to attempt it.
For such a purpose, I can not command a file of Men that can be depended upon; &
there is not, that I know of, a Company of Regulars within 200 miles of me. So that
I have no Choice, but to submit to indignity, & to acquiesce in this high insult upon the Authority of my Government, & wait for a more firm Establishment of it.

I cannot but express to your Lordships my hopes, that the Conduct of Mr Oliver upon this occasion will not be condemned. He is an exceeding good Man, punctual in all his duties, & of the most respectable Character in the Province. But under the Terrors of the first Night; the expectation of greater distress upon the Second; his Wife & Children drove from their own House, & not safe in any other; himself devoted to Destruction by an enraged & merciless Mob; & no Power in the Place capable of protecting him; what could be done but to purchase his Security upon any Terms offered? No Considerations of Profit would induce a Man under such Circumstances to set so mad & incensed a People at defiance; and therefore it is to be hoped, that no obligations of Duty required it.

Having gone thro’ this shocking & long Detail, I shall now conclude this letter; and shall write further to your Lordships, as occasion shall require, upon this subject.

I am, with the greatest respect, My Lords, Your Lordships most Obedient and most humble Servant,

Fra Bernard

The Right Honble The Lords Commn for Trade, &c.

ALS, RC

Endorsed by John Pownall: Massachusetts. Letter from Francis Bernard Esq’, Gov’t. of Massachusetts Bay, to the Board, dated August 15. 1765, containing a particular Account of a Riot at Boston, which had arisen on account of the Stamp-Act passed last Session of Parliament. Rec’d. Oct’. Read 8. 1765. Ll. 86.

Enclosures: copies of the minutes of the Massachusetts Council of 14 and 15 Aug. 1765, CO 5/891, ff 279-280; By His Excellency Francis Bernard, Esq; . . . A Proclamation for requiring all Justices of the Peace . . . to bring to Justice . . . Persons concerned in the unlawful proceedings [of 14 Aug.] . . . and promis[ing] a reward of one hundred pounds. . . . Given at the Council-Chamber in Boston, the fifteenth day of August 1765 (Richard Draper, Printer to His Excellency the Governor and the Honorable His Majesty’s Council: Boston, 1765). This particular version carried the royal arms. Ibid., ff 281-282. Variant text in Stowe, 265: 15-22, 114-121 (L, Copy) with enclosures at pp. 26-29, 57-59, 129-132, 272-273; extract of para. one (from “Two or three . . . disaffected”) and para. eight (“the common talk . . . Spectators”) in Extracts from Parliamentary Papers on the Stamp Act, 1764-1765, RH4/99: 12-13.

The letter printed here is the original version, mutatis mutandis, of FB to Halifax, CO 5/755, ff 261-272 (ALS, RC). FB probably composed the letter to (former Secretary) Halifax first, before writing out another to send to the Board. The Board’s RC has been given precedence over the secretaty of state’s RC because it arrived in London first (even though Halifax’s letter was dispatched before the Board’s). The letter to the Board was sent under cover of No. 369 and carried by the brig Swallow, Capt. Andrew Gardner, which sailed for Bristol on 2 Sept. It was likely received in London on 7 Oct., along with No. 373. It was considered by the Board the following day, and on 10 Oct. forwarded to the Privy Council.

Halifax’s RC was carried by the snow Elisabeth, William Bell, which left Boston for Glasgow on 18 Aug. (No. 389); the letter arrived in London on 14 Oct. CO 5/755, ff 261-272 (ALS, RC), with enclosures at ff 274-274. (Confirmed by CO 5/43, pt. 1, ff 97, 109.) The secretary of state’s reply is No. 405.

FB’s letter to the Board Trade thus constitutes the first official account of the riot of 14 Aug, to be received by the British government (on 7 Oct.) But it arrived after the Rockingham ministry had already learned of Boston’s second riot, of 26 Aug., from FB’s letter to Halifax of 31 Aug. (No. 384), which was received on 5 Oct. and considered by the Board of Trade three days later. Oliver provided his own account in letters to Thomas Whately, Boston, 20 and 23 Aug. 1765, T 1/439, ff 71-72

1. See No. 364.

2. The Boston Gazette. A week before the first Stamp Act riot, TH noted that the “news paper threats” had prompted officials to discuss how the violence and threat of violence might impact upon “the execution of the stamp act.” TH to Jackson, Boston, 6 Aug., 1765, Mass. Archs., 26: 145.

3. FB’s ex post facto rationalization presupposes a not unreasonable connection between the Whig newspaper writers and those who might have planned the riot. The riot was probably organized by the committee of artisans and shopkeepers known as the Loyal Nine, who included one of the Boston Gazette’s co-owners, Benjamin Edes (1732-1803). The Loyal Nine were associated with the town’s political caucuses and local politician Samuel Adams (1722-1803), and facilitated the union of the North and South End gangs, whose participation in the Stamp Act riots was vital to their success in intimidating officials responsible for its implementation. Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 161; Hoerder, Crowd Action, 92-97.

4. The proceedings of the morning of Wednesday 14 Aug. described here centered on the large elm tree, subsequently known as Liberty Tree, standing near the intersection of Essex and Orange streets in the South End. The effigy’s right hand was marked “AO” for Andrew Oliver (according to TH), while (according to the Gazette) a label attached to the breast was inscribed “HE THAT TAKES THIS DOWN IS AN ENEMY TO HIS COUNTRY.” A second effigy represented Lord Bute. TH to Richard Jackson, Milton, 16 Aug. 1765; Mass. Archs. 26: 145a-145b; Hutchinson Correspondence, 1; Boston Gazette, 19 Aug. 1765.

5. The Gazette suggests that it was the “Owner” of the tree who tried to remove the effigy until “being advis’d to the contrary by the Populace.” A “Multitude of Spectators” gathered during the course of the day, while unidentified persons protested the Stamp Tax by requiring townsfolk to have their “Articles stamp’d by the Effigy.” Ibid. This might account for the councilors’ initially describing the protest as a “sport.”

6. FB’s decision to call a Council meeting was evidently made in the morning, after he had consulted with the Boston gentlemen, but before he learned from TH that Sheriff Greenleaf and his men “did not think it safe to attempt cutting down” the effigy let alone arresting any rioter. TH to Jackson, op. cit.

7. FB’s report of the meeting greatly enriches the bland official record in CO 5/823, f 282.

8. The exact time at which the crowd arrived at the Town House is uncertain. The Gazette suggests that “Thousands” joined a procession from the Liberty Tree to the Town House coming by way of the “Main Street”—in other words a direct route along Newbury and Marlborough streets to the Cornhill. Another report likened the procession to a mock funeral, noting that the effigy, having been cut down by “a Number of reputable People,” was placed on a “Bier,” covered with a sheet and carried “in a regular and solemn Manner amidst the Acclamations of the Populace thro’ the Town,” up to the Town House. Boston Evening-Post, 19 Aug. 1765. Hoerder (op. cit.) suggests that the assemblage making its way along “Main Street” was organized by the North End gang, while the funereal procession was led by the South End mob.
9. Judging by the newspaper reports, on leaving the Town House the crowd headed eastward down King Street and turned into Kilby Street, which led onto Oliver’s Dock where the new brick stamp office was situated.

10. TH, Stephen Greenleaf, Charles Paxton, and others. TH to Jackson, op. cit.

11. FB’s assertion of murderous intent has not been taken seriously by scholars who, on the whole, consider the first Stamp Act riot to fit with patterns of oppositional action wherein crowds aimed to intimidate rather than harm their targets. Hoerder, Crowd Action, 100-101. FB’s account of the evening’s events was likely derived from conversations with Andrew Oliver and TH before the Council meeting held on the following day. The sinister motives that FB ascribes to the rioters may well have originated with Oliver (as is suggested by the penultimate paragraph of the letter printed here) though not perhaps with TH, who notes only that he thought his brother-in-law would be “in danger” had he not persuaded him to leave his house as the mob entered the front door. TH to Jackson, op. cit. The newspapers provide detailed reports of the ransacking of Oliver’s property.

12. TH recalled it as “[G—d—n] their blood heres the Sheriff with the governor stand by my boys let no man give way.” TH to Jackson, op. cit.

13. At the request of TH, who had already approached Col. Joseph Jackson. Ibid.

14. Jackson may have relayed this directly to FB rather than go through TH. It was after giving Jackson the governor’s order to summon the militia that TH made his vain attempt to disperse the mob.

15. It was published in that day’s Boston Newsletter, 15 Aug.


17. The source is unknown, but may have been Oliver or one or more of the magistrates mentioned, or even TH before he left town on 16 Aug. for his home at Milton.

18. Oliver was obliged to act out the resignation again, on 17 Dec. See No. 422.

19. TH was inside the house when this incident commenced, at 9 PM, and he observed “several 100” people present. TH to Jackson, op. cit.

20. Crowd numbers are estimated to have been between 2,500 and 5,000 during the daytime, with people from neighboring towns joining Bostonians, and at night up to 3,000. Hoerder, Crowd Action, 98.

21. These particular claims probably derived from the discussions that FB had had with those who had been caught up in the events of the previous two days, especially TH, Oliver, and Greenleaf.


369 | To John Pownall

private dupl:1

Castle William Aug 18 1765

Dear S’.

The Letter to their Lordships inclosed with this is a duplicate, excepting in the address of a letter wrote to my Lord Halifax,2 which was yesterday put on board the Snow Elisabeth, William Bell Master, bound for Glasgow, as she passed the Castle: This will follow in 2 or 3 days. I have nothing to add to the Narrative, except that I heard yesterday that a paper was stuck up at the Exchange3 in answer to my proclamation, wherein it is asserted that the Persons at the head of the late