

= Hutchinson Letters Affair =

The Hutchinson Letters Affair was an incident that increased tensions between the colonists of the Province of Massachusetts Bay and the British government prior to the American Revolution . In June 1773 letters written several years earlier by Thomas Hutchinson and Andrew Oliver , governor and lieutenant governor of the province at the time of their publication , were published in a Boston newspaper . The content of the letters was propagandistically claimed by Massachusetts radical politicians to call for the abridgement of colonial rights , and a duel was fought in England over the matter .

The affair served to inflame tensions in Massachusetts , where implementation of the 1773 Tea Act was met with resistance that culminated in the Boston Tea Party in December 1773 . The response of the British government to the publication of the letters served to turn Benjamin Franklin , one of the principal figures in the affair , into a committed Patriot .

= = Background = =

During the 1760s , relations between Great Britain and some of its North American colonies became strained by a series of Parliamentary laws (including the 1765 Stamp Act and the 1767 Townshend Acts) , intended to raise revenue for the crown , and to assert Parliament 's authority to pass such legislation despite a lack of colonial representation . These laws had sparked strong protests in the Thirteen Colonies ; the Province of Massachusetts Bay in particular saw significant unrest and direct action against crown officials . The introduction of British Army troops into Boston in 1768 further raised tensions that escalated to the Boston Massacre in 1770 .

In the years after the enactment of the Townshend Acts , Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson and his colonial secretary (and brother @-@ in @-@ law) Andrew Oliver wrote a series of letters concerning the acts , the protests against them , and containing suggestions on how to respond , to Thomas Whately , an assistant to Prime Minister George Grenville . Whateley died in 1772 , and his papers were turned over to his brother William . Whateley at one point gave access to his brother 's papers to John Temple , another colonial official who sought to recover letters of his own from those papers .

Hutchinson was appointed governor of Massachusetts in 1770 , following the critical publication by opposition politicians of letters written by his predecessor , Francis Bernard . Over the next two years Hutchinson engaged in an extended and rancorous written debate with the provincial assembly and the governor 's council , both of which were dominated by radical leadership hostile to Parliamentary authority . The debate centered on the arbitrariness of executive prerogative and the role of Parliament in colonial governance , and greatly deepened divisions in the province .

The Massachusetts debate reached a pitch in England when the colonial secretary , Lord Dartmouth , insisted that Benjamin Franklin , then acting as agent for Massachusetts in London , demanded that the Massachusetts assembly retract its response to a speech the governor gave early in 1772 as part of this ongoing debate . Franklin had acquired a packet of about twenty letters that had been written to Whately . Upon reading them , Franklin concluded that Hutchinson and Oliver had mischaracterized the situation in the colonies , and thus misled Parliament . He felt that wider knowledge of these letters would then focus colonial anger away from Parliament and at those who had written the misleading letters . Franklin sent the letters to Thomas Cushing , the speaker of the Massachusetts assembly , in December 1772 . He insisted to Cushing that they not be published or widely circulated . He specifically wrote that they should be seen only by a few people , and that he was not " at liberty to make the letters public . "

The letters arrived in Massachusetts in March 1773 , and came into the hands of Samuel Adams , then serving as the clerk of the Massachusetts assembly . By Franklin 's instructions , only a select few people , including the Massachusetts Committee of Correspondence , were to see the letters . Alarmed at what they read , Cushing wrote Franklin , asking if the restrictions on their circulation could be eased . In a response received by Cushing in early June , Franklin reiterated that they were not to be copied or published , but could be shown to anyone .

= = Publication = =

A longtime opponent of Hutchinson 's , Samuel Adams narrowly followed Franklin 's request , but managed to orchestrate a propaganda campaign against Hutchinson without immediately disclosing the letters . He informed the assembly of the existence of the letters , after which it designated a committee to analyze them . Strategic leaks suggestive of their content made their way into the press and political discussions , causing Hutchinson much discomfort . The assembly eventually concluded , according to John Hancock , that in the letters Hutchinson sought to " overthrow the Constitution of this Government , and to introduce arbitrary Power into the Province " , and called for the removal of Hutchinson and Oliver . Hutchinson complained that Adams and the opposition were misrepresenting what he had written , and that nothing he had written in them on the subject of Parliamentary supremacy went beyond other statements he had made . The letters were finally published in the Boston Gazette in mid @-@ June 1773 , causing a political firestorm in Massachusetts and raising significant questions in England .

= = Content of the letters = =

The letters were written primarily in 1768 and 1769 , principally by Hutchinson and Oliver , although the published letters also included some written by Charles Paxton , a customs official and Hutchinson supporter , and Hutchinson 's nephew Nathaniel Rogers . The letters written by Oliver (who became lieutenant governor when Hutchinson became governor) proposed a significant revamping of the Massachusetts government to strengthen the executive , while those of Hutchinson were ruminations on the difficult state of affairs in the province . Historian Bernard Bailyn confirms Hutchinson 's own assertion that much of the content of his letters expressed relatively little that had not already been publicly stated .

According to Bailyn , Hutchinson 's ruminations included the observation that it was impossible for colonists have the full rights they would have in the home country , essentially requiring an " abridgement of what are called English liberties " . Hutchinson , unlike Oliver , made no specific proposals on how the colonial government should be reformed , writing in a letter that was not among those published , " I can think of nothing but what will produce as great an evil as that which it may remove or will be of a very uncertain event . " Oliver 's letters , in contrast , specifically proposed that the governor 's council , whose members where then elected by the assembly with the governor 's consent , be changed to one whose members were appointed by the crown .

= = Consequences = =

In England , speculation ran rampant over the source of the leak . William Whately accused John Temple of taking the letters , which Temple denied , challenging Whately to a duel . Whately was wounded in the encounter in early December 1773 , but neither participant was satisfied , and a second duel was planned . In order to forestall that event , Franklin on Christmas Day published a letter admitting that he was responsible for the acquisition and transmission of the letters , to prevent " further mischief " . He justified his actions by pointing out that the letters had been written between public officials for the purpose of influencing public policy .

When Hutchinson 's opponents in Massachusetts read the letters , they seized on key phrases (including the " abridgement " phrase) to argue that Hutchinson was in fact lobbying the London government to make changes that would effect such an abridgement . Combined with Oliver 's explicit recommendations for reform , they presented this as a clear indication that the provincial leaders were working against the interests of the people and not for them .

Bostonians were outraged at the content of the published letters , burning Hutchinson and Oliver in effigy on Boston Common . The letters were widely reprinted throughout the British North American colonies , and acts of protest took place as far away as Philadelphia . The Massachusetts assembly and governor 's council petitioned the Board of Trade for Hutchinson 's removal . In the Privy

Council hearing concerning Hutchinson 's fate , in which the aftermath of the Boston Tea Party was also discussed , Franklin stood silently while he was lambasted by Solicitor General Alexander Wedderburn for his role in the affair . He was accused of thievery and dishonor , and called the prime mover in England on behalf of Boston 's radical Committee of Correspondence . The Board of Trade dismissed Franklin from his post as colonial Postmaster General , and dismissed the petition for Hutchinson 's removal as " groundless " and " vexatious " . Parliament then passed the so @-@ called " Coercive Acts " , a package of measures designed to punish Massachusetts for the tea party . Hutchinson was recalled , and the Massachusetts governorship was given to the commander of British forces in North America , Lieutenant General Thomas Gage . Hutchinson left Massachusetts in May 1774 , never to return . Andrew Oliver suffered a stroke and died in March 1774 .

Gage 's implementation of the Coercive Acts further raised tensions that led to the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War in April 1775 . Franklin , who had been politically neutral with respect to the colonial radicals prior to his appearance before the Board of Trade , returned to America in early 1775 , committed to independence . He went on to serve in the Second Continental Congress and became a leading figure in the American Revolution .

= = Who gave Franklin the letters ? = =

A number of candidates have been proposed as the means by which Benjamin Franklin acquired the letters . John Temple , despite his political differences with Hutchinson , was apparently able to convince the latter in 1774 that he was not involved in their acquisition . He did , however , claim to know who was involved , but refused to name him , because that would " prove the ruin of the guilty party . " Several historians (including Bernard Bailyn and Bernard Knollenberg) have concluded that Thomas Pownall was the probable source of the letters . Pownall was Massachusetts governor before Francis Bernard , had similar views to Franklin on colonial matters , and had access to centers of colonial administration through his brother John , the colonial secretary . Other individuals have also been suggested , but all appear to have an only tenuous connection to Franklin or the situation . Historian Kenneth Penegar believes the question will remain unanswerable unless new documents emerge to shed light on the episode .