**Patriots, Pranksters, or Pragmatists:
A Closer Look at the Butter Rebellion and its Leaders**

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_Then arose Asa, the Scribe, and went unto Belcher, the Ruler, & said, behold our butter stinketh, and we cannot eat thereof; now give us, we pray thee Butter that stinketh not. And Belcher the Ruler said, trouble me not, but begone unto thine own Place; but Asa obeyed him not._

Thus began the first recorded student rebellion in America. Angered by the consistently poor quality of butter served at meals, Harvard’s undergraduates “rose up and departed” from the Commons, going instead “every one to his own Place” to eat. Throughout September and October of 1766, Harvard College students and administration feuded over the events of what would come to be called the Butter Rebellion. Thomas Hodgson and Daniel Johnson, leaders of the march from the hall, negotiated with the President and tutors, who threatened the students with expulsion. But the “Sons of Harvard,” as the rebellious lot dubbed themselves, stood firmly behind their colleagues, proclaiming to Johnson, “Neither thou, nor thy Comrade Thomas shall be expelled; nor shall a Hair of your Heads fall the Ground.” Instead, the students vowed that if their “Rulers shall punish Asa, or Daniel or Thomas, we will depart everyone to his own Home.” Such action did not prove necessary, though, and after nearly a month of back and forth, the parties reached a settlement. Asa Dunbar was merely degraded in rank, Johnson and Hodgson emerged from the ordeal unscathed, and the students signed a confession, apologizing for their misconduct. And “after this there were no more Murmurings in Harvard, but all was Peace and Quietness as it is to this Day.”

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2 The Commons were where the students were required, by college law, to dine. Source: Lane, p35-37.
While Joseph Cummins’ account closes with the suggestion of “Peace and Quietness,” the years following the Butter Rebellion were far from calm. Within ten years, the Revolutionary War would begin, and the colonies would declare independence from Great Britain. The uprising’s proximity to the Revolution adds intrigue to its legacy. Does the Butter Rebellion mark the beginning of the politicization of Harvard’s students? Just how revolutionary were these early rebels?

Some historians do remember the Butter Rebellion as an early sign of the revolution among the ranks of Harvard College. David Robson’s *Educating Republicans*, an exhaustive overview of college life during the American Revolution, calls the rebellion “an opportunity to draw up a complaint couched in the terms of the colonial protests against British measures.” In the same paragraph, he goes on to assert that Harvard “students during the 1760s and 1770s became politically conscious and overwhelmingly patriot.” This tendency to mention the Butter Rebellion in the same breath as revolutionary activity is common. Samuel Eliot Morison, in his description of the event, claims that the students behaved “in the style of patriots protesting against unconstitutional oppression.” Citing the Butter Rebellion as a beacon of the cause the colonies would adopt and as a precursor to further revolutionary action is easy to do. Harvard did go on to become a hotbed of revolutionary activity. Many of the college’s graduates were actively involved in the fight. College treasurer John Hancock signed the Declaration of Independence, and Harvard dormitories housed patriot soldiers during the

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4 Joseph Cummins – Harvard A.B. 1772
war. Even the name the Butter Rebellion students chose—the Sons of Harvard—seems to suggest a proximity to the revolutionary cause. But while Harvard’s undergraduates may have borrowed the name, their rebellion did not demonstrate revolutionary ideals. By examining the butter rebels’ lives as students, their political allegiances after college, and the failures and successes of their uprising, it becomes apparent that the Butter Rebellion was not an indication of political leanings, but rather a plea for higher quality breakfast.

Glorified in the highly stylized account from “The Book of Harvard,” an account written in 1768 by student Joseph Cummins, the actual proceedings of the event are somewhat difficult to pin down. The most detailed description is scattered throughout more than fifty pages of the handwritten Faculty Records kept by Harvard’s administration. While Cummins’ entertaining depiction of the Butter Rebellion gives an idea of what went on, the real story is documented best by the Faculty Records of the time.

The Butter Rebellion started with Asa Dunbar’s dining hall stand, when he confronted Belcher Hancock, a veteran tutor since 1727, about the poor quality of butter. With the “whole College” looking on, Hancock scolded Dunbar to return to his seat. Insisting that the butter smelled rotten, Dunbar remained standing, and the Butter Rebellion was born. The night following Dunbar’s resistance, many of the other students met in Holden Chapel. Over one hundred of Dunbar’s colleagues resolved to march out of the dining hall the next day if the butter were once again bad. Additionally, they voted to leave college should their classmate be “expelled or rusticated.” They did not know,

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9 Faculty Records, III, Harvard University Archives 5-20
however, that Dunbar had been summoned to a meeting with the administration. “For the great Misdemean’ he hath been guilty of, in contemnuously refusing Obedience to his Tut’…before the whole College then assembled,” Dunbar made “a most humble Confession” and was “degraded to lowest Place in his Class.” While the Rebellion was over for Dunbar, the other rebels were just beginning. When the butter was still bad at the following morning’s breakfast, the rebels rose up in unison and departed the hall.

Perhaps emboldened by the strength of the numbers behind them, the Butter Rebellion leaders passed up opportunities to confess “the irregularity & illegality of their Conduct,” an action that started weeks of back-and-forth negotiation between students and administration. Daniel Johnson, one of the two students singled out as a leader of the march, met privately with Edward Wigglesworth, a newly appointed professor. He warned Johnson, “That unless he made a proper Acknowledgment, He did not see how the Governours of the College cou’d avoid, Voting his Rustication or Expulsion.” In light of the consequences, “Wigglesworth strongly urged him, to give in an humble Acknowledgment of his Misconduct, in Writing, & to Submit himself to the Clemency of the Governours of the College.” Defiant in his ways, Johnson replied, “That he was not more culpable than the other Scholars & That he would not make any Confession,” refusing to admit any wrongdoing.

This initial conversation became typical. As the meetings continued, both sides refused to budge. The students voted “that if any Person was punished…for any Thing that had been done in Consequence of bad Butter, They would all leave the College.”

10 Faculty Records, III, Harvard University Archives. 5-20.
11 Sibley, Class of 1747, 510.
12 Faculty Records, III, Harvard University Archives. 5-20.
13 Ibid.
At the same time, the college administration continued in their attempt to restore “Good order and Conduct.” With the sides stalled, the President and Tutors drafted a confession for the students to sign, and called in Johnson and Thomas Hodgson, another leader, to approve. The confession promised “to behave as becomes of dutiful and obedient Pupils for the Future.” But Hodgson insisted “that he would not sign any Confession,” threatening emtpily again “that all the undergraduates would leave College before They wou’d sign.” Skeptical, the administration requested that anyone opposed to signing a confession present himself. “In about half an Hour almost the whole College was at the President’s Door.”

Four days later, in an apparent about face, a Committee acting “in the Name of the Undergraduates,” including the formerly defiant Hodgson, submitted a somewhat limited confession. Addressed simply to “Gentlemen,” the students admitted, “we are sorry, if by any of our Actions, we have incurred the Displeasure of any of our Worthy Instructors.” Apparently, the students had underestimated the administration’s displeasure, because the Board of Overseers voted to reject the confession. This time, it was the Board’s turn to make threats, warning that each student involved “shall be deemed to have renounced his Relation to the College, & shall not be again admitted.”

The path to savior was a new confession—one that took a much harder line—drafted for the undergraduates to sign. “We the Subscribers being now made sensible,” it read, “manifest our hearty Sorrow for every Thing Each of us severally have done, contrary to the Good Order & Laws of the College, & humbly ask Pardon.” By rejecting the

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid. 27
16 Ibid 5-20.
17 Ibid.
“modest” student confession and replacing it with a much stronger one, the administration successfully settled the dispute. The students—who had so eagerly arrived at the President’s door to demonstrate their unwillingness to sign a confession—submitted to their higher authority, penned their names, and ended the Butter Rebellion.

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The Butter Rebellion was not the first time Harvard students had started trouble. In fact, the undergraduates had developed a penchant for irritating their superiors, calling into question the seriousness of their uprising. In 1763, rebellion leader Asa Dunbar was caught engaging in “riotous behavior.” Dunbar was let off because, as a freshman, he was “insensible to the heinousness of the crime.”18 Some of the other students involved in the misconduct were not so lucky, and were fined and punished for “hallooing in the yard,” “making tumultuous noises,” and “going into town” despite being “told by the tutors to go to [their] chamber[s].”19 Other prominent Butter Rebellion participants likewise had track records. Dunbar’s roommate and fellow confession signee Samuel Willard was once fined for “pissing in Massachusetts cellar.”20 Just a few days after the Butter Rebellion cooled down, Daniel Johnson, chief communicant with the faculty, was granted leave “to go home to get cur’d of the Itch.” When his roommate, Daniel Jones, came before the administration a few days later with the same problem, suspicions of a sexually transmitted disease were confirmed. Johnson was degraded to the lowest rank in his class for “countenancing, encouraging and associating with, one or more lewd

18 Dunbar’s “heinous” crime is never specified, although it is assumed that it was some combination of “hallooing in the yard,” “making tumultuous noises,” and “going into town.” Apparently, the administration took absence and disturbance of the peace seriously.
19 Faculty Records, II, Harvard University Archives. 194-197.
Women.” Edward Oxnard, who chaired the committee that submitted the Butter Rebellion confession, lived with James Dennie, of whom the only information known is that he was rusticated for “the atrocious crime of keeping a bad, Woman, disguised in male clothing, in a college room.” Thomas Hodgson’s roommate, John Watson, was punished “for false answering in the Chapel for those call’d over or Absent from Prayers,” and for “breaking open” John Winthrop’s study door and taking his “Dog out of the study.” The price for dog-knapping was five shillings and a public confession. The worst of them all, though, was Hodgson himself. During his brief time at Harvard, the confession committee member was mentioned in the Faculty Records for “cutting,” “absence,” “supping in town,” “lodging a stranger,” “a disorder at Mrs. Sprague’s,” “cutting” again, being “out of town without leave,” “making tumultuous noises,” “cutting” a third time, “visiting a distant tavern,” and taking “a private vacation of seven weeks duration.” Finally, he was rusticated for “great and Scandalous Crimes,” including keeping a “lewd Woman” in his room. His petition to be reinstated and restored to grace was denied, and he failed to graduate with his class.

Not surprisingly given the track record of its leaders, the Butter Rebellion had an element of showmanship to it that reflected its participants’ past and future behavior. The actual march from the Hall, which took place a day after Dunbar’s initial protest, was largely dramatic, to the point that it seems recreational. The Faculty Records describe the

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21 Sibley, P488.
22 Although Oxnard’s involvement is not recorded in the Faculty Records, it would seem as though a cross-dressing woman would be difficult to hide from a roommate, and thus, at the very least, Oxnard would have been complicit in his roommate’s sexual endeavors. Source: Faculty Records, III, *Harvard University Archives*. P37-8.
23 John Winthrop was a fellow student, in the Class of 1765. *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*.
24 Sibley, P428.
25 Faculty Records, II: 204, 208, 211, 212, 218, 247, 252, & Faculty Records, III 37, 53. Harvard University Archives.
26 Sibley, P485.
students’ departure from the hall as “tumultuous,” continuing on to complain that, “As soon as the Scholars were gotten in to the Yard, They huzzaed in such a Manner, as appear’d a design’d Insult upon the Tutors who were left sitting in the Hall.” The administration grumbled that, “The Huzzaes were so loud as to be heard in the Town.” Following their congregation in the Yard, “the Scholars who left the Hall in the disorderly manner Breakfasted in several Houses in the Town.”

The students were loud and celebratory about their protest, calling to mind Dunbar’s first offense, from his freshman year, when the students were loud and “tumultuous” and rioted jovially. In this light, the Butter Rebellion seems to have been more about entertainment than revolution.

The uprising is also reminiscent of the drama that took place in the streets of Boston. In the years surrounding the Butter Rebellion, the Boston waterfront hummed with political activity, while laborers hit the streets to demonstrate and riot with force. The Pope’s Day parade was an annual example of this, where mobs from rival North and South Boston burned effigies of the pope, and later united to burn effigies of stamp collectors and British officials. But while the street action held serious political commentary, the students’ loud “huzzaes” and their breakfast on the town suggest an aspect of fun. Even the students’ written account, Joseph Cummins’ history of the uprising, is playful. “The Book of Harvard” refers to the administration by their student nicknames, and is written in an informal and poetic style—“trouble me not, but begone unto thine own place,” it reads.

Language like this turns the uprising into a mockery,

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27 Faculty Records, III, Harvard University Archives. P8.
28 Bradley, Allan. “Street Theater As Revolutionary Discourse.” Accessed online via: http://my.harvard.edu:80/icb/icb.do?keyword=k64288&pageid=icb.page286769&pageContentId=icb.pagecontent597601&view=view.do&viewParam_directory=/Drafts%20Group%202#icb_pagecontent597601,
30 November 2009.
possibly even making light of the more serious drama that took place in Boston. When viewed this way, it is difficult to group the Butter Rebellion with some of the true revolutionary activity of the time.

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The students of the Butter Rebellion were not motivated by revolutionary leanings. But because the Butter Rebellion could have just been the beginning of a politicization of Harvard students, it is necessary to examine what they would become. By looking closely at their later lives, we can garner a better sense of what the Butter Rebellion was all about and see how revolutionary the students really were. If the Butter Rebellion really planted the seeds of revolution at Harvard, we would likely see its participants go on to follow a trend of political action. Given the nature of the fighting, with local militia playing a crucial role, we could probably expect revolutionaries to put in some sort of military service during the war. At the very least, a revolutionary spirit during the lives of its participants could point to the Butter Rebellion as a demonstration of the budding spirit of revolution at Harvard. But of the classes of 1767 and 1768, those who took part in the Butter Rebellion, ran the gamut between loyalist and revolutionary. Of the seventy-five confession signers in those two classes, fifty-one left behind enough evidence to determine a political affiliation. Among those fifty-one were fourteen loyalists—nearly thirty percent. These loyalists either fled the country as refugees, or were openly allied with the British. The remainder allied in some way with the colonial cause, with twenty-three students going on to serve in battle, either as a solider, a doctor,
or a preacher. While, of course, loyalists make up a minority of students, their representation among the rebels is sizeable.

This trend continues when looking at a smaller sample. During the negotiation period with the administration, the students elected a committee to represent them. This committee was responsible for communicating with the administration, and submitted the first confession, which the President and tutors of the college rejected as inadequate. Edward Oxnard (chair), Isaac Smith, Thomas Hodgson, Zaphaniah Briggs, and David Greene made up the committee. Briggs served dutifully in the Revolution, and Hodgson was eventually expelled from college, failing to graduate with his class. The other three representatives—Oxnard, Smith, and Greene—were all loyal to the crown, with Greene and Oxnard fleeing the colonies for England as refugees during the Revolution.

The split between loyalist and revolutionary actors makes it difficult to advance the idea that the Butter Rebellion represented politicization at Harvard. Nowhere is this split epitomized as in the life of Butter Rebellion “scribe” Asa Dunbar, the first student to voice his concern with the quality of butter. The spark that ignited the uprising, Dunbar stood up to the veritable Tutor Hancock in the dining hall, making him “guilty of a very great misdemeanor by an high act of disobedience to the repeated Orders of his tutors before the other tutors and the whole College.”

The next day, although Dunbar had already been punished, many of his fellow students followed his lead, marching out of the

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30 I generated these numbers by looking at the Sibley’s page for each graduate. Unfortunately, nineteen students could not be categorized, because not enough information exists to understand their political leanings. Examples of students categorized as unsure are Minot (A.B. 1767), who moved to Jamaica and Cumings, who paid to avoid serving in the war. Additionally, five students died before the Revolution, and thus also remain uncategorized politically. John Langdon Sibley, *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, Harvard University Archives.
31 Harvard Faculty Records, II, Harvard University Archives. P17.
32 Information for each student comes from *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*. Briggs, Hodgson, Oxnard, and Smith are A.B. 1767, Greene is A.B. 1768.
33 Faculty Records, III, Harvard University Archives.
hall when the butter had not improved. Dunbar’s initial protest had started a standoff that would last weeks. An understanding of this leader’s life could give insight into the Rebellion itself.

Dunbar, who graduated from Harvard in 1767, would go on to lead a less rebellious life as a successful pastor, and later as a lawyer. He began his career in Bedford, but shortly thereafter was recruited by the First Church of Salem, where he went on to preach until 1779. During his time at Salem he married into a loyalist family, making the daughter of Tory Colonel Elisha Jones his wife. This relationship complicates the understanding of Dunbar, making it difficult to place him on the side of the loyalists or the revolutionaries. His brothers-in-law were active on the Tory side—Josiah Jones was imprisoned for his loyalty, along with Jonathan Hicks (A.B. 1770). This presented trouble for Dunbar, whose wife helped break her brother out of jail in June of 1775. Because of this association Dunbar was brought into the jail for questioning.

Dunbar’s loyalty came under fire again, although this time publicly. In the Boston Gazette on September 18, 1775, the pastor addressed an advertisement “To the public,” regarding “some uneasiness arising in the midst of people from the conduct of myself and family upon fast day.” Wanting “to live in good fellowship with every friend to

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34 Apparently, Dunbar was a polarizing figure, possibly due to his “sharp wit.” (Sibley’s. His wit shines through in his commonplace book, as well, in several of his letters.) At Salem, he was recruited to eventually replace pastor Thomas Barnard. However, Dunbar was competing with Barnard’s son, Thomas, for the job. This controversy caused a rift among the churchgoers. The conflict ended with the younger Barnard’s supporters selling their pews and establishing the North Church in Salem. Sources: Dunbar, Asa. Diary 1771-1778. American Antiquarian Society. – information from letters to his father and to Barnard. Credit to Sibley’s for the establishment of the North Church as the result of the pew buyout—this information is listed on Dunbar’s page, Sibley P457.

35 Sibley 457-463.

36 Ibid.

37 Fast Day refers to July 20, 1775, when Congress advised that “considering the present critical, alarming, and calamitous state of these colonies, do earnestly recommend that Thursday, the 20th day of July next, be observed by the inhabitants of all the English Colonies on this continent, as a day of public humiliation, fasting, and prayer” Source: “Proceedings in Congress Relative to the Fast,” ed. Richard Owen Roberts,
American liberty,” Dunbar publicly proclaimed in the paper that his “part…in those transactions that gave offence was dictated solely by the principles of religion and humanity with no design of displeasing any one.” Apparently, there was suspicion that he “despised the [Fast] day, and the authority that appointed it.” Hoping to correct this position, Dunbar asserted “from the love of truth” that he instead did “very highly respect and revere that authority.”

Aware that he had brought himself into poor favor, Dunbar took out newspaper space to publicly correct his image. Apparently, this clarification was enough to relieve him of his transgression—in the spot right below his advertisement, the “committee of correspondence of Weston and Sudbury…release him from any unfavorable suspicions that have arisen to his disadvantage.” It is not completely certain what his transgression was on Fast Day, as Dunbar’s apology is vague, and no other record has survived. *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, though, speculates that it was the invocation of a public prayer that landed Dunbar in trouble. Although the prayers found in Dunbar’s commonplace book are not dated, one “public prayer” does have a Loyalist invocation. In the prayer, Dunbar hoped that the American nation’s “unique ties” to Britain “be reformed + forgiven.” He prayed that “thy servant George, our King, our gracious queen, + all yᵉ royal family long live in peace on earth,” wishing for God to grant them “immortal life + glory.”

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38 Boston Gazette, September 18, 1775. Accessed via microfilm at Harvard University, Widener Library. 39 Ibid. 40 Sibley 457-461. 41 George III, King of Great Britain from 1760 to his death in 1820. He ascended to the throne at the young age of 22. His rule was marked by the loss of the American colonies, as well as significant expansion of the British Empire. Throughout his rule, he battled fits of insanity, and eventually relinquished his power in 1811, although still holding the title of King. Source: "George III" Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009.
Invoking the crown as his authority proved controversial for Dunbar. Fast Day occurred at the request of Congress, who pleaded that the American people might observe it as a day of “humiliation, fasting, and prayer.” On a day called upon by Congress, well-wishing King George while ignoring the American authority suggested that Dunbar “despised the day, and the authority that appointed it.”

The invocation of a later prayer, though, suggests a change of heart. Drafting a sermon in his commonplace book, Dunbar opened an oration in a very different way. Instead of pledging allegiance to Great Britain, Dunbar thanked God that He had “supported us in our exertions against our enemies, + so far seconded our endeavors to maintain + secure our natural rights + privileges.” He continued, “We thank thee that thou hast preserved y® lives of so many of our officers + soldiers + especially y® important life of our illustrious Commander in chief.” In tune with the happenings of the Revolution, Dunbar made no mistake in this prayer about his support of the revolutionary cause, at least outwardly. Unfortunately, we cannot know if this apparent change in allegiance is true, or merely a cover following the public embarrassment he suffered at the hands of the Committee of Correspondence in Weston. Although Dunbar sought forgiveness through his advertisement and changed his later invocation, there still

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43 Boston Gazette, September 18, 1775. Accessed via microfilm at Harvard University, Widener Library.

44 As noted before, Dunbar unfortunately did not date his commonplace book entries. This prayer is later than the previous one, though, as it appears later in the book than the first.

remains an air of doubt regarding his support of the revolutionary cause. This uncertainty serves as a good portrayal of the split between Tory and revolutionary among Dunbar’s fellow butter rebels. Like his class as a whole, Dunbar seems to have leaned toward the revolutionary side, but still showed some reluctance to abandon his devotion to the crown. The overall political ambivalence of its actors, though, suggests that the Butter Rebellion had little to do with a revolutionary ideology.

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When discussing Cambridge, “where youthful opposition generally…took the form of forbidden pranks,” historian Hiller Zobel mentions the Butter Rebellion in his text, *The Boston Massacre*:

The students…provoked by rancid butter, combined in “the earliest recorded College rebellion.” The authorities met the challenge with a directness scarcely to be recognized two centuries later…The college’s governing boards brushed aside written remonstrances and offered the Butter Rebels only two alternatives: apologize or get out. The students apologized.”

46 In Zobel’s mind, the Butter Rebellion was a failure. While they may have risen up against bad butter, the administration’s “directness” in the form of an ultimatum left the students with little option. Although they tried to make up for their grievances with “written remonstrances,” they eventually backed down under the threat of expulsion. The quick way that Zobel offers the conclusion to the story—“The students apologized.”—suggests a sense of defeat. He sees the Rebellion as a prank that the students abandoned when consequences became serious. Ultimately, they were more concerned with preserving their places at Harvard than with commitment to their cause.47

47 But why does Zobel mention the Butter Rebellion in the first place? His book asserts that the riotous mob was a product of careful manipulation on the part of Boston and Harvard elites. In the street theater,
The story that the Faculty Records tell, although slightly more complicated than Zobel leads his readers to believe, does give the same sense of defeat. Although the rebels had originally threatened leaving college, and had refused to sign a confession, they were “made sensible” in due time, and order was restored. But does this eventual confession mean that the Butter Rebellion was a failure? And what does the students’ surrender say about them?

That the actors of the Butter Rebellion failed to meet the challenge presented by their authority is certain. By collapsing under the threat of expulsion and agreeing to sign a confession forced upon them, the rebels showed their unwillingness to carry their rebellion out, abandoning empty threats like leaving college in the aftermath. This is the conclusion we reach when we think about the Butter Rebellion in light of the Revolution. By considering the rebellious activity that would follow this 1766 episode, as Zobel does, the surrender to authority seems weak and pathetic. In hindsight, then, it is easy to dub the Butter Rebellion a failure—and this is exactly what Zobel’s tone does. But when we think about the uprising for what it was about—namely, butter—it becomes more difficult to conclude that the students lost the power struggle. In order to understand the Butter Rebellion as anything other than a failure, we must shed the context and consider the idea that it may have just been about butter.

Indeed, throughout the standoff, the Butter Rebellion leaders consistently asserted that this was the case. In his first conversation with Wigglesworth, Johnson promised, artisans were puppets, and the Sons of Liberty their masters. If the Butter Rebellion were, then, an instance of young Harvard students practicing revolutionary tactics, then it would fit nicely into Zobel’s thesis. But, with the Butter Rebellion driven by bad butter and, if anything, making light of the drama of the streets, Zobel’s view of the revolution is turned upside-down. Instead of the street taking cues from Harvard elites, the Butter Rebellion shows the Harvard elites mocking street theater, turning serious political action into a sort of joke.
“that neither He nor the other Scholars did intend any Disrespect to any in the Government of the College, & that their only intention was, to procure a Redress of that Grievance of bad Butter.” The faculty records recorded his explanation concerning the extreme methods the students pursued. “The Method They went into was the only one, by which they cou’d have obtained a Redress of their Grievance,” Johnson claimed. He was told, “that the College Law prescribed, First an Application to the President and Tutors, Then to the Corporation & Overseers.” Johnson insisted, however, “if they had proceeded in that Manner, they shou’d have been obliged to have eat all the Bad Butter before They cou’d have procured Redress.” According to Johnson, the extremism with which the students pursued their goal wasn’t really a choice, as they felt they had no other way to improve their particularly poor quality of butter. This approach transformed the event from a mere food complaint into the stalemate it became.

Once the issue was brought to the attention of the administration, however, it likewise found that the butter quality was poor. On September 24, just one day after Dunbar confronted Tutor Belcher in the hall, the President, Professors, and Tutors voted for “a committee to examine the condition of the Steward’s Butter.” That committee later submitted a report that “allow’d” just three out of eleven barrels of butter “for Sauce only.” The other eight barrels inspected were deemed “condemn’d absolutely.” Those results led the administration to vote, on September 26, “that the Steward hath been blameable in frequently sending into the Hall bad butter,” and that “frequently sending unsuitable Butter into Commons, was a just matter of grievance to the College in general.” The committee informed the President of its conclusions, and the President

48 Faculty Records, III, Harvard University Archives. 12
50 Ibid 4-5.
passed the message along to the steward, instructing him to “take proper care for the Future.”

While outwardly, the faculty felt the need to assert its authority over the students, it had all the while internally acknowledged the problem and set about solving it. This may explain why the students, in a matter of four days, went from the President’s door, refusing to sign a confession, to forming their own committee and formally submitting an apology—a complete reversal of their position. For the administration, the larger issue became the disobedience, and thus the political posturing was necessary to keep the students in check. But for the undergraduates, better butter was the goal—a goal that had been addressed. Joseph Thaxter, class of 1768, later summed up the Butter Rebellion:

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51 Ibid.
At that time our Market did not afford a sufficient supply of Butter. It was usual for Merchants to import large Quantities from Ireland…We were served Irish Butter. It was bad, very bad. We made our Complaint not obtaining Redress we agreed to leave the Hall and did with as little Confusion as might be expected—This brought forward a thoror Reform and the Commons were good and well cooked till I left College.52

Thaxter found that the butter did, in fact, improve after the Butter Rebellion, painting the uprising as a victory for the students. His account may be exaggerating the Rebellion’s results, perhaps in an effort to glorify the rebels. But when considering the severity with which the administration approached the problem—they dubbed it a “grievance to the College in general,” formed a committee to examine the butter, and castigated the steward—it seems as though the students’ actions did, at least to some degree, accomplish what they set out for. In this way, without distraction by the back-and-forth between administration and students, we can come to view the Rebellion as a success.

The Butter Rebellion does not mark some sort of new politicization at the college. Harvard students stirred trouble often, dating back decades. Indeed, it wasn’t that unusual for these teenagers to be loud and riotous. The Faculty Records mention the words “impudent,” “tumultuous,” “great noises,” and “riot” no fewer than thirty-five times from 1740 until the Butter Rebellion in 1766. These mentions include several general riots, in which students “huzzaed” in the Yard, and “a notorious riot” on the night after Commencement Day that caused “Disturbance of the whole College and a number of Gentlemen there convened on that public Occasion.” Students had even included food in their previous disturbances, as one group was punished for “having a Rost of Fowls”

52 Joseph Thaxter to Charles Lowell, Feb 13, 1826, in Disorders Papers, Harvard University Archives. Via: Sibley 95.
instead of dining in the commons. Thinking about the Butter Rebellion in light of the students’ appetite for ruckus strips it of the seriousness it is often given.

It is true that the students voiced their culinary concern in a way similar to revolutionary action of the time. The 1760s Boston waterfront hummed with political activity, sending fearful messages by burning effigies on Pope’s Day and destroying the homes of British officials. But the Butter Rebellion wasn’t a mob of angry townspeople, it was a group of elite teenage boys living away from home, studying Greek and Latin. It didn’t take place by the waterfront, or near the state house, it happened inside Harvard Hall and in Harvard Yard, home to some of the most lavish buildings in the region. Recall the humorous way the rebels told their story—“give us, we pray thee Butter that stinketh not,” wrote Cummins. If, indeed, the Butter Rebellion was related to the revolutionary activity of the time, it’s that the students were making light of it. This idea has broader consequences. Understanding the relationship between the elite of the revolution and the common folk who advanced it on the ground is important. Zobel’s book asserts that the riotous mob was a product of careful manipulation on the part of Boston and Harvard elites. For him, the street theater’s artisans were puppets, and the Sons of Liberty were their masters. If the Butter Rebellion were, then, an instance of young Harvard students practicing revolutionary tactics, then it would fit nicely into Zobel’s thesis. But, with the Butter Rebellion driven by bad butter and making light of the drama of the streets—if even conversing with the streets at all—Zobel’s view of the

53 Faculty Records, I, Harvard University Archives, 100.
revolution is turned upside-down. Instead of the street taking cues from Harvard elites, the Butter Rebellion shows the Harvard elites mocking street theater, turning serious political action into a sort of joke.

When looked at without a predisposition to categorize the Rebellion as patriotic, revolutionary, or a precursor to the political action in which Harvard students would take part, we can view the Butter Rebellion with a greater understanding. At its core, the uprising was a collaboration between students who would later split along political lines. Once the empty threats of the students and administration fell flat, the insurrection can be seen as an apolitical plea for better food—one that provided an entertaining distraction for weeks. Consider the role of butter in 1766. While it may be just a trivial condiment today, butter was an important part of a Harvard student’s diet, as breakfast consisted only of coffee, tea, milk, and either “Bread or Bisket & Butter.” As one of two foods served daily, consistently bad butter would have made for a terrible breakfast. It is understandable, then, that the students felt the need to do something about it. The way the butter rebels expressed their discontent had little in common with waterfront activity. While retrospective thinking sees it as an example of revolutionary activism, a closer examination of its context understands the 1766 student uprising as an isolated incident ignited by consistently poor breakfast. True to its name, the Butter Rebellion really was just about butter.

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56 During these weeks, considering he would shortly after the resolution come down with the Itch, Daniel Johnson would presumably by day negotiate with faculty and by night keep company with “lewd women.”
57 Lane, 37.
Bibliography:


Boston Gazette, September 18, 1775. Accessed via microfilm at Harvard University, Widener Library.

Faculty Records, II, Harvard University Archives.

Faculty Records, III, Harvard University Archives