

The Edenton Tea Party, 25 October 1774: A Patriotic Female Community
in Revolutionary North Carolina

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ABSTRACT

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My thesis examines the background and significance of the women who participated in the Edenton Tea Party, which took place in 1774. By examining this important event and the community that supported it, I illuminate the common political and domestic struggles of white women in the American Revolution as well as how they changed. The time period includes Edenton's part in the colony's participation in the war, the women's demonstration, their subsequent wartime experiences, and the legacy of their unprecedented rebellion, all of which place women on the path to attain the right to participate in American government. I analyze county data from archives, published collections, correspondence, government documents, maps, and other photos. My thesis fills the gap in the historiography of the Edenton Tea Party and the women in Chowan County in the revolutionary period. The demonstration set a precedent for women's subsequent participation in the United States.

DEDICATION

First, this thesis is dedicated to the women who participated in the Edenton Tea Party.

Second, it is dedicated to my mother Christy Shelton who passed away on October 3, 2011. She was my best friend, and she was proud that I was going to be the first member of our family to earn my Master's Degree. She will always be in my accomplishments and in my heart.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to the two best women I will ever know: Mae Malcolm and Ida Webb. Mae is my great-grandmother, my namesake, and the best cook I know. Ida is my grandmother, a retired policewoman, and the toughest woman I know. They are also my best friends. Since I was born, they have loved and supported me in everything I have done. Like the Edenton women, they are not afraid to stand up for what they believe in, especially their faith, and they taught me to do the same.

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CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
DEDICATION	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	7
2. PRE-REVOLUTION	15
3. TEA PARTY	41
4. REVOLUTION	63
5. CONCLUSION	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY	88
VITA	93

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I consign this bit of native history rudderless to the tide,
trusting some friendly wave may bear it safely on.”¹

Richard Dillard

On October 25, 1774, fifty-one women gathered on the shore by the Chowan County Courthouse to dump their tea into the shallow waters of Edenton. They explained their actions, “We cannot be indifferent on any occasion that appears nearly to affect the peace and happiness of our country.”² Like many other male and female colonists in America at the time they were opposed to the increased British taxes and governance that followed the French and Indian War. However, their demonstration was unlike those that came before it in that it was organized and executed publicly by a large group of prominent women. They did not disguise themselves, and they displayed pride in their declaration, which was accompanied by their signatures.

Their actions were unique, but the patriotism that they represented was not. At that time there were women in every colony supporting their men in their opposition to Great Britain. Though they did so in different ways, all of them contributed to the revolutionary cause and victory. In the wake of the war the men of the colonies praised such women for their input at the same time that it debated what role the sex should play in the newly created nation.³ However, women’s part in the war faded from literature until a little over a decade before the American

¹ Richard Dillard, “The Historic Tea-Party of Edenton, October 24th, 1774: An Incident in North Carolina Connected with British Taxation,” (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1901), 3.

² “Edenton, North Carolina, Oct. 25, 1774,” *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 16 January 1775.

³ Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America’s Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), xi.

Civil War, when Elizabeth Ellet wrote their first history, *Women in the American Revolution* (1848). Her goal was “to render a measure of justice - inadequate it must be – to a few of the American matrons, whose names deserve to live in remembrance.”⁴ Hers remained the only account of women in the war, apart from Elizabeth Cometti’s brief “Women in the American Revolution” (1947), until the early 1970s. It was then that scholars began to write about the significance of the role that females played in the Revolution.

All of the works written about them in the last forty years argue that women’s participation was important to the war effort, but they differ on the details of how their roles were shaped before, during, and after the war. Mary Beth Norton’s *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (1980) focuses on the changes in women’s private lives and argues that women’s domestic role fostered their political role. This is seen in her description of the Edenton Tea Party, “The Edenton statement marked an important turning point in American women’s political perceptions.”⁵ Their participation in their government was no longer limited to domestic duties.

On the other hand, Linda Kerber’s *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1980) focuses on the changes in women’s public lives and asserts that the ideas in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) were present in the war, only to be repressed by “Republican Motherhood.”⁶ In her description of the Edenton Tea Party, she states that such women’s petitions were “virtually unknown” before the 1770s.⁷ She later describes the significance of such demonstrations, “Not until economic boycott became

⁴ Elizabeth Ellet, *Women in the American Revolution* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1848), 22.

⁵ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980), 161.

⁶ Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 289.

⁷ Kerber, 289.

a major mode of resistance to England did it become obvious that women would also have to be pulled out of the privacy of their traditional domain and propelled into the public world of political decisions.”⁸ She and Norton are the leaders of the field, and they come to similar conclusions, primarily the synthesis of women’s domestic and political roles.

Scholars also attribute women’s role in the Revolution to different trials in their colonial background. Paul Engle’s *Women in the American Revolution* (1976) argues that only strong men and women could have endured the harsh conditions of the previous century and a half in the colonies. Such men and women, after working on the land, became Americans instead of Europeans in spirit, and this caused the war to be inevitable.⁹ Similarly, Edith Patterson Meyer makes the case that the hardships of marriage, motherhood, and the French and Indian War prepared the women for the role that they would play in the Revolution.¹⁰ They meet at their conclusion that women’s seasoning in the American colonies prior to the war prepared them to support their families during it.

Other scholars argue that women’s participation in the war for independence from Great Britain showed the women how to rebel against male authority on the home front. Betsy Erkkila’s “Revolutionary Women” (1987) contends that such female challenging of the traditional roles of men and women was the most radical change that resulted from the Revolution,¹¹ while Sally Booth takes it a step further. She dismisses “docile, prudishly proper females” like Martha Washington who gradually replaced “the real women of the revolution,” mavericks like Phillis Wheatley, in the wake of the war.¹²

⁸ Kerber, 8.

⁹ Paul Engle, *Women in the American Revolution* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1976), xi.

¹⁰ Edith Patterson Meyer, *Petticoat Patriots of the American Revolution* (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1976), 18-19.

¹¹ Betsy Erkkila, “Revolutionary Women,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1987): 190.

¹² Sally S. Booth, *The Women of ’76* (New York: Hastings House, 1973), 304-305.

Edenton, North Carolina was the headquarters for a group of women who were leaders of such change in the Revolution, the women of the Edenton Tea Party. Unfortunately, few accounts of this town and the surrounding county in the revolutionary period are available, and they focus on the men in the county. The first of them is Elizabeth Moore's *Guide Book: Historic Edenton and Chowan County* (1989). In it, she describes the background and significance of each historical building in the county, many of which were occupied by influential men and women during the Revolution and the subsequent union. The only other account that describes the town's experience in the period in detail is Thomas Parramore's *Cradle of the Colony: The History of Chowan County and Edenton, North Carolina* (1967). He argues that it is "the cradle of the colony" because the town has been the center of much of the important operations of the government, especially in the revolutionary period.¹³ Ironically, neither of the works has much to say about the Edenton Tea Party.

In fact, most of the works previously mentioned, in addition to many others, only mention the Edenton Tea Party in passing. Most of them include a brief description of the event, a passage from the declaration that the women signed, the famous nineteenth century cartoon that satirizes it, and a quote from the only known letter that was written about it. The exception is Richard Dillard's "The Historic Tea-Party of Edenton, October 25th, 1774: An Incident in North Carolina Connected with British Taxation" (1901). In it, Dillard describes the event as well as five of the women who participated in it in more detail. He also asserts that the demonstration is "no longer a legend, or myth in North Carolina history" but one of the important events that led to the break from Britain.¹⁴

¹³ Thomas C. Parramore, *Cradle of the Colony: The History of Chowan County and Edenton, North Carolina* (Edenton: Edenton Chamber of Commerce, 1967), 4.

¹⁴ Dillard, 16.

Though Dillard's account is a valuable addition to the scholarship of the subject, there is much more to be done on the event. This is especially true concerning the background of the demonstration, those who participated in it, and the effect that it had on its community as well as women's subsequent role in American society and politics. Out of fifty-one signatures, forty-six women's lives have been ignored in literature, and one of the objectives of this thesis is to tell as many of their stories as possible and use them to explain the tea party as well as its significance.

Before the Edenton Tea Party, women had supported the cause often as individuals and rarely as groups, but they had not done so on such a large and public scale, defying male authority without male participation. This set the women and the county apart from the others in the colonies. The question is how did the Chowan community shape such patriotism? Despite the fact that it was one of the smaller counties in North Carolina at the time of the tea party and decreased in size during the war, the town of Edenton played a key part in the Revolution. It did so because of its geography and its leadership. Its port was difficult for warships to access, making it an ideal shipping point for patriot supplies, and many of the colony's leading patriots and government officials lived in and around the town.

The female population of the county was essential in this role that the town played in the war. Many of the women were related to the leaders of the colony by blood or by marriage; others were not. Regardless, all of them experienced the hardships of the war, in addition to those of North Carolina's rough country and the roles that they were expected to play in their homes, and many of them chose to support the patriot cause more directly. Such women, through demonstrations like the Edenton Tea Party, shared and furthered the patriot cause in the American Revolution.

Because scholars have only made brief statements about the significance of the event and the town's women in the war, this thesis focuses on these subjects and answers many of the questions that surround the tea party. It tells who the women who participated in it were, what their participation entailed, when and in what circumstances it occurred, where in the town it occurred, the significance of the location, and the impact that the demonstration had on American women's history.

Unfortunately, the public and private records of female lives in the Revolutionary period are much more limited than those of their male counterparts, and this thesis is based on the forty women I found in the records. As Cokie Roberts says in her popular account of women in the Revolution, "Though we thankfully seem to have every grocery list the Founding Fathers ever wrote, most of the women left no written traces."¹⁵ It is estimated that no more than half of the women in the colonies at this time were literate enough to sign their names, much less record their actions.¹⁶ My ability to overcome such limitations when writing about the female population of a small town is due to the economic and social prominence of many of the women and their men.

Not only did all of the fifty-one women sign their names to the declaration that accompanied the tea party. A few of them, especially Jean Blair, wrote and exchanged letters with other women and men in the county. Such records, in addition to other private collections, county records, censuses, tombstones, newspapers, maps, and other pictures were invaluable in this study, and this thesis focuses on the women who left the most records behind to represent the others. These women are Mrs. Penelope Barker, Mrs. Jean Blair, Mrs. Mary Blount, and Mrs. Penelope Dawson.

¹⁵ Cokie Roberts, *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2004), xvii.

¹⁶ Norton, xix.

In spite of the prominence and literacy of the women, they were faced with many of the same challenges as those who were less and more fortunate in North Carolina as well as the other twelve colonies, and the Revolution intensified them. Norton calls such challenges “the universals of female lives,” and they include “courtship, marriage, pregnancy and childbirth, child rearing, and household work.”¹⁷ Not all women experienced them, and each woman who experienced them did so differently. In any case, they were standard roles that unified female colonists during the war. All of them were wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, cousins, or aunts, and all of them faced decisions concerning the loyalties of their households that influenced their futures in one way or another.

In addition to the stress of such roles, the female population of Chowan County had to prepare for war in northeastern North Carolina, which presented obstacles of its own. Albemarle land was not as tame as that of many of the other cities in the colonies in the revolutionary period, and it was composed mostly of Loyalists. Though siding with the Patriots was especially life threatening in this area, the women of the Edenton Tea Party displayed extraordinary support for those who fought for independence.

Accordingly, this thesis illuminates the significance of the actions of these women and connects them to those of the women in other towns in North Carolina as well as those in the other colonies. The first chapter focuses on the defining background of eastern North Carolina and its women as well as the structure of Chowan County in the revolutionary period and how it shaped its female community. The second chapter focuses on the tea party and American and British reactions to it. The third chapter focuses on the women’s subsequent wartime experiences. The conclusion focuses on the legacy of the women and their tea party. The purpose of these chapters is similar to that of Ellet’s work. The women who participated in the Edenton

¹⁷ Norton, xx.

Tea Party deserve to be remembered in addition to their men for their service to their country.

This thesis provides a better understanding of the social, economic, and political roles that female patriots played in the American Revolution and the new nation it created.

CHAPTER 2

PRE-REVOLUTION

“Upon examining the biography of illustrious men, you will generally find some female about them, in the relation of mother, or wife, or sister, to whose investigation a great part of their merit is to be ascribed.”¹⁸

John Adams to Abigail Adams

The first known inhabitants of the land that became Chowan County, North Carolina belonged to a tribe of Native Americans called the Chowanokes. These Indians were residing near the Chowan River as early as 1586. It was in the same year that the English arrived, but this did not surprise the tribe or their neighbors, the Weapmeocs, because they had been hearing stories of the white men’s presence for the last eight months, since English ships had arrived in the local sounds and their crews had built a fort on Roanoke Island.¹⁹ From this time to the American Revolution, the relationship between Europeans and Indians was a source of hardship and had a major impact on the lives of the colonists of the county.

Because the land that became Chowan County was the first section of North Carolina to be settled by the English, it was the focal point of the colony for the first century. It was not until 1610 that the first lull in its settlement occurred as a result of the challenges that its Great Dismal Swamp and the civil war in England presented. Despite this delay, the English saw it as beneficial to resume its settlement in 1654.²⁰

¹⁸ Ellet, 18.

¹⁹ Parramore, 5-7.

²⁰ Parramore, 4-10.

The first Englishman who permanently settled in the Albemarle region was probably a Virginian named Nathaniel Batts. He moved to the area in 1654 and built his house between the Roanoke River and Salmon Creek. In the latter half of this century, the Albemarle Sound attracted only “the most adventurous or discontented” of the English and the northern colonists. The land was not expensive, but survival on it required talent concerning relations with Native Americans and the ability to produce everything one needed to live.²¹

By 1660, there were approximately 500 inhabitants in the Albemarle area, and by 1663, multiple families had settled near the mouth of the Chowan River. Because of these developments, eight proprietors, granted authority by Charles II of England, established Carolina as a province in 1663. They distributed “glowing and misleading advertisements describing the ease and comfort of Carolina life,” but they did not convince many of their countrymen to make the move to the overseas colony. Much of this was due to the overly optimistic tone of the brochures, which many Englishmen did not believe.²²

Despite their failure, some settlers had come to the eastern side of the colony and set up secluded farms north of the Albemarle Sound and along the Chowan River by 1675. Because of their convenient location, many of these farms became centers for the local governmental and social functions, connecting their inhabitants into a community. Consequentially, this area was given boundaries and named Chowan precinct in 1685, and by 1700, “the Albemarle was no longer a frontier environment, though not many miles to the west the country was wild and unknown.”²³

²¹ Parramore, 10-11. The Albemarle region is the area that surrounds the Albemarle Sound, a large freshwater sound that borders Edenton.

²² Margaret Smith and Emily Herring Wilson, *North Carolina Women: Making History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 21; Parramore, 11.

²³ Smith and Wilson, 21-25; Parramore, 12-15.

It was in the Albemarle area that the first colonial capital and the second oldest town in North Carolina, Bath being the first, was established. In 1722, “ye towne on Queen Anne’s creek” was named Edenton after the colony’s late governor, Charles Eden. The town’s first years were threatened by the Tuscarora Indian War taking place to the south and to the west as well as the presence of pirates, but its inhabitants were increasingly prosperous in the subsequent decade. Thomas Parramore explains this development, “Although the province contained few educated men it had many of talent and initiative.”²⁴ This remained the case in the town into the Revolutionary period.

William Byrd, a Virginia aristocrat, recorded that there were approximately fifty homes in Edenton by 1728, which he described as generally small and made of wood. Because of the simplicity of their construction, he found them wanting when he compared them to those in Williamsburg and other Virginia communities.²⁵ This judgment, like his disappointment in the construction of the Cupola House, is overly harsh. Such dwellings were common in this region at the time, and the Cupola House has been praised for its distinct and ornate structure since it was built. It even became the home of some of Edenton’s most prominent figures in the latter half of the century.

As a result of the colony’s increasing prosperity, the crown took direct control of North Carolina in 1729, and John Brickwell recorded that ten more families settled in Edenton in the subsequent decade. Another result of the colony’s growth was the decision to encourage the development of the town by making it the site of the land office of the Earl of Granville. It was through this office that all of the surveying, selling, and collecting of rent for half of the colony passed. Several of the houses that were later owned by the families of the signers of the Edenton

²⁴ Parramore, 15-20.

²⁵ Parramore, 17.

Tea Party Resolves were built in the years that followed these developments, including the Iredell House, the Charlton House, and the Craven House. In addition to the progress of the town, “the countryside was also being transformed” in those years.²⁶

At the same time the Albemarle area was developing, its women were earning a reputation for resilience and self-reliance. As early as the seventeenth century, visitors wrote about how they were superior not only to women in other areas but even to their own men. John Lawson recorded that the female inhabitants were “the most industrious sex in that place” after seeing them in action. William Byrd observed that the women like the Mrs. Jones he encountered could “carry a gunn in the woods and kill deer, turkeys, &c., shoot down wild cattle, catch and tye hoggs, knock down beeves with an ax and perform the most manfull Exercises as well as most men in those parts,” without appearing uncivil, rugged, or immodest.²⁷

Such feats were especially challenging in an area that was not as tame as those to its west and north. Traveler Ebenezer Hazard noted to himself, “Take no more short cuts in North Carolina — Had to cross two Mill Dams and met with great Difficulty. Rode through a very gloomy Cypress Swamp: — lost my way.” George Fox, the Englishman who founded Quakerism, visited the Albemarle in 1672 and recorded that not long after his boat got stuck in shallow water, he was rescued by the wife of a government official who arrived in her own canoe to deliver him to shore. Clearly, it was not only the lower class women who were skilled in the travelling and working of the land.²⁸

In contrast to the women, men like Lawson were not impressed with the male inhabitants, the younger of which he described as “commonly of a bashful, sober Behavior.” To him, these

²⁶ Parramore, 18-22.

²⁷ Quoted in Smith, 27; 28-32; quoted in William Byrd, “Boundary Line Proceedings, 1710 (Continued),” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 5, no. 1 (July 1897): 10.

²⁸ Harry L. Watson, *An Independent People: The Way We Lived in North Carolina, 1770-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 6; Smith, 19.

young men paled in comparison to their rugged and pioneering fathers as well as their women. Not only did he record that most of the women, old and young, could sew their own clothing from their own cotton and flax, but they were also “very handy in Canoes and will manage them with great Dexterity and Skill, which they become accustomed to in this watery country.” As a result of the teaching of such women and their men, their children were “very docile and learn any thing with a great deal of Ease...and those that have the Advantage of Education, write very good Hands, and prove good Accountants.” Later in the century, such education was provided to more children, male and female, in the area.²⁹

Janet Schaw, an upper class Englishwoman who kept a diary as she visited several towns on the coast of North Carolina between 1774 and 1776, also wrote that the area’s women were superior to its men and admitted that this finding surprised her. She agrees with “a sensible man” who had lived in the area for a long time that this was the result of the education provided to the females in the families who had moved to the colony when it was first established, “The mothers took the care of the girls, they were train’d up under them, and not only instructed in the family duties necessary to the sex, but in those accomplishments and genteel manners that are still so visible amongst them, and this descended from mother to daughter.” Schaw goes as far as determining that the women in the towns “would make a fine figure in any part of the world,” and she declares her intention to respect them as they do her.³⁰

By this time, North Carolina’s population was nearly nine times larger than it had been in 1700 as a result of increased immigration and birth rates, making it the fourth most populated colony in the Revolutionary period. The population of Edenton had increased as well, reaching

²⁹ Parramore, 12-13.

³⁰ Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 154.

as many as 500 inhabitants, and this number did not include the residents of the surrounding countryside.³¹

Even though the town, like most of the others in North Carolina, was smaller than many in the other colonies, its organization also served the needs of the people in the rural section of the county, which had a larger population than the town. Edenton was the center of governmental and political operations, and the men who were employed in these operations, though less in number like their town, were important to the livelihoods of their rural neighbors. Historian Harry Watson explains their significance, “For the planter who planned his whole year’s work with the expectation of selling staple crops, market towns were clearly central to every economic activity.”³²

Edenton’s location and layout is significant in that light. Because it is located on Edenton Bay, it is mostly surrounded by water, with the Albemarle Sound on its southern side emptying into the Chowan River on its western side. In addition, the town itself was shaped like a square with all of the public buildings and private houses located within short walking distance of each other. These characteristics made travel to, from, and inside Edenton convenient, and they were especially vital in the Revolutionary period.

The construction of the buildings in Edenton and the surrounding county were similar to those in other counties in North Carolina as well as those in neighboring colonies. The public buildings were composed of brick and influenced by Roman architecture, and the private houses ranged from one-room cabins and hall-and-parlor houses to two story houses with a hall in the

³¹ Smith, 32; Donald Barr Chidsey, *The War in the South: The Carolinas and Georgia in the American Revolution, An Informal History* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1969), 15; Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, *Parson Pettigrew of the “Old Church”: 1744-1807* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 8.

³² Quoted in Watson, 54; 1-79.

center and two to four large rooms on each floor, which were influenced by English architecture. Simplicity and efficiency were the themes of most of their structures.³³

The range of buildings is also evidence that the inhabitants of the town had more opportunity to advance in their employment and their position in society than their rural neighbors, except for the plantations of the townsmen. The reason for this was the increased opportunity for various kinds of interaction in the urban setting. It was in the town that many of the women who participated in the Edenton Tea Party lived and gathered to support the Patriots' cause.³⁴

The foremost of the participants, Mrs. Penelope Barker, and her husband lived in a house in the center of the town that was a symbol of the prominence that could be attained by those who lived in urban settings in the eighteenth century. Penelope was a leader of society, and men like her husband, Thomas Barker, "owned stores, warehouses, sailing vessels, and often plantations as well. They controlled town politics, and, by close association with the governor and the assembly, won high office and colonial and state government as well." Because of the roles that the Barkers played in the Revolutionary period, the house has been preserved and moved to the shore of the Albemarle Sound nearly a century later.³⁵

Another participant in the party, Mrs. Elizabeth Ormond, lived on Water Street, one street north of the Barker House, in the Cupola House after she married Dr. Samuel Dickinson. Her husband was another leading citizen of the town, and he bought the house, which was large and named for the small but stylish dome on its roof, during the Revolution. Another participant, Mrs. Rebecca Bondfield, lived on King Street, one street north of the Cupola House, after she

³³ Watson, 50; Alice Elaine Mathews, *Society in Revolutionary North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1976), 52.

³⁴ Watson, 1. Some accounts of the Edenton Tea Party claim that some of the women who participated were from neighboring counties, but this study focuses on those who lived in Chowan County.

³⁵ Quoted in Watson, 54; Dillard, 12.

married Charles Bondfield. Edmund Hoskins, Joseph Hewes, and Colonel Thomas Nash also lived on King Street, all of whom were related or engaged to one of the women.³⁶

The Littlejohn House, home of William and Sarah Littlejohn, was located on the next street to the north, Eden Street. In addition to Sarah being a participant in the Edenton Tea Party, the Littlejohns' store, as it is referred to several times in James Iredell's diary, was a center of commercial and social activity in Edenton in the late eighteenth century. Iredell notes that he constantly ran into the ladies and gentlemen of the town there, including the Johnston women, all of whom are described later because of their involvement in the town's tea party. Two houses down from the Littlejohns lived Jasper and Abigail Charlton, the latter being another participant. They had built their house between 1761 and 1769.³⁷

Another of the party's women, Mrs. Lydia Bennet, lived on Queen Street, one street north of the Littlejohns, with her husband, William, in the Leigh-Hathaway House. The couple resided there from 1771 to 1777. Above them, on the northernmost street in the town, was St. Paul's Church, which is North Carolina's second oldest church building and has had its charter longer than any other in the state, since 1701. Like the Littlejohns' store, it was a center of the town's social activity. In a letter that Penelope Dawson, another woman who participated in the party, wrote to Samuel Johnston ca. 1773, she recorded that the enjoyable weather of the past Sunday had "tempted almost every body in Town to venture to church" and that Mr. Iredell's sermon, substituted for Mr. Bruce, "gave genteel satisfaction."³⁸

James and Hannah Iredell, one of the most prominent couples in North Carolina in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, lived two houses down from the church during the

³⁶ Elizabeth Vann Moore, *Guide Book to Historic Edenton and Chowan County* (Edenton: Edenton Woman's Club, 1989), 9; Don Higginbotham, ed., *The Papers of James Iredell, 1767-1783: Volumes I and II* (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1976), 218; Lemmon, 8.

³⁷ Higginbotham, 184-189; Moore, 34.

³⁸ Moore, 39-42; Quoted in Higginbotham, 143.

Revolution. The Iredell House was and is “a monument to Iredell’s personal success as well as a symbol of the close association between leading townsmen and powerful families in the country.” Since ninety-eight percent of the inhabitants of North Carolina resided in the rural section of the county, this was important to the state as well as the town.³⁹

In addition to those who lived in Edenton, several of the women who participated in the Tea Party resided in the country. Penelope Dawson lived in the Eden House, which was west of Edenton on the Chowan River. James Iredell described its location as across the Albemarle Sound and “just before” his property. Not far from Eden House was the Hayes Plantation, which Iredell recorded as “just across Queen Anne’s Creek from Edenton.” It had been the home of Samuel and Frances Johnston, another one of the most prominent couples in North Carolina in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, since 1765, and it remained so until the Revolution ended.⁴⁰

On the Albemarle Sound to the east of the town was Mulberry Hill, the plantation of James and Ann Blount, the latter having participated in the Edenton Tea Party with her mother. The Blount’s house was large, being four stories and composed of brick, and it represented the prominence of the family. Ann’s mother Frances Hall also lived in the countryside. She and her husband Reverend Clement Hall had resided on the Shelton plantation since 1755. The family was acquainted with Winifred Wiggins Hoskins, another participant who also lived in the rural section of the county, close to the town.⁴¹

Edenton had attracted such prominent families with its abundance and variety of resources and economic opportunity. A 1773 pamphlet advertising North Carolina in Scotland

³⁹ Moore, 47; Watson, 56; Mathews, 53.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Higginbotham, xliii, 107; Parramore, 26.

⁴¹ Higginbotham, xliii; Lemmon, 32; Moore, 63, Richard Dillard, “The Historic Tea-Party of Edenton, October 25th, 1774: An Incident In North Carolina Connected with British Taxation” (University of Michigan Library, 1901), 13.

described these advantages, starting with the animals that could be hunted in the state. They included “many deer, 30 pound wild turkeys, geese and ducks, partridges, doves, larks, woodcocks, snipes, plovers, and blackbirds...besides a great number of sea fowl.” It also describes the fertility of the environment as sufficient to produce “rice, indigo, hemp, tobacco, fir, deer skins, turpentine, pitch, tar, raw hides, tanned leather, flower, flax-seed, cotton, corn, pease, potatoes, honey, bees-wax, Indian corn, barreled beef and pork, tallow, butter, rosin, square timber of different sorts, deals, staves, and all kinds of lumber,” with the most fertile soil along the creeks and rivers. Even though towns like Edenton, New Bern, Wilmington, and Cross Creek were small, they were market centers in North Carolina.⁴²

Edenton was in a superior position to ship such goods after they were produced. Its long wharves were symbols of its largely maritime economy, which was especially important during the Revolutionary period, with 827 ships exporting American goods to foreign ports between 1771 and 1776. Half of them departed for the West Indies while the other half departed for New England. Included in these exports were “almost ten million staves, more than sixteen million shingles, 320,000 bushels of corn, 100,000 barrels of tar, and a great variety of other produce” in addition to 24,000 barrels of fish, 6,000 hogsheads of tobacco, 1,000 deerskins, all from farmers and merchants in the area. In return, they imported 250,000 gallons of rum, 100,000 gallons of molasses, 600,000 pounds of sugar, 150,000 pounds of salt, and 400,000 yards of linen for their county’s trade and consumption.⁴³

Producing such quantities of goods required a great deal of labor from the county’s inhabitants. Watson argues that labor was required in order to gain wealth in North Carolina in

⁴² Quoted in William K. Boyd, “Informations Concerning the Province of North Carolina, Addressed to Emigrants from the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland,” *Some Eighteenth Century Tracts Concerning North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Company, 1927), 438-439; 440-441; Lindley S. Butler, *North Carolina and the Coming of the Revolution, 1763-1789* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1976), 4.

⁴³ Higginbotham, xli; quoted in Parramore, 26-27.

the eighteenth century. The colony was not as wealthy as South Carolina or Virginia, and the land was inexpensive. A man had only to find men and women to work it to advance his financial and social position. However, most worked smaller plots of land with less help or by themselves. For these reasons, North Carolina's economy was more like those of the northern colonies than its southern neighbors. It was mainly yeomen.⁴⁴

While class was the main determinant of wealth in Great Britain, a man could obtain wealth in the colonies by being "talented, imaginative, [and] hard-working," as long as he respected the racial and religious standards of his community. This was especially true in North Carolina. The elite class was considerably open, and this made it easier for a man to both climb to and fall from a higher position in its society. Such qualities caused the colony's distribution of wealth to be more equitable than those in the North.⁴⁵ This shaped the economic and social structure of Edenton as well as Chowan County in the Revolutionary period.

Although many of the families who lived and worked in such towns in North Carolina were wealthy like the Barker family and those similar to them in their position in society, there were also many who earned less, including ministers, teachers, printers, doctors, sailors, lesser merchants and artisans, and laborers without a specific skill. Furthermore, the colony's elite class was not as wealthy as those in some of the other colonies, especially Virginia. This was also true in Chowan County.⁴⁶

Even the most affluent inhabitants of the county did not own quantities of land that were excessive when compared to those of the wealthier colonies. While one percent of its inhabitants was "truly wealthy" with more than 7,800 acres and six percent was "well-to-do" with more than

⁴⁴ Watson, 29; Higginbotham, xxxix; Mathews, vii.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Harlow Giles Unger, *American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2011), 13; Watson, 75; Mathews, 20.

⁴⁶ Watson, 57.

3,125 acres, sixty-eight percent was “moderate,” and twenty-five percent had less than one hundred acres to no land at all. Ultimately, only four of its inhabitants owned more than 1,000 acres in the county and at least the top seven percent of its riches.⁴⁷

Many of the women who participated in the Edenton Tea Party owned land or were members of families who owned much of the land in Edenton and the surrounding section of Chowan County. Those who were listed as owning land in the 1785 Chowan County Tax List included families that owned town lots, families that owned acres, and families that owned both.

Among those who owned town lots, Mary Littledale owned one town lot, Elizabeth Patterson owned four, Sarah Valentine owned six, and Thomas King owned seven. Among those who owned both, Mary Creecy owned 100 acres and four town lots, Thomas Barker owned 143 acres and nine town lots, Ann Anderson owned 225 acres and seven town lots, and Ruth Benbury owned 500 acres and six town lots. Those who did not own town lots but owned land in the county ranged from the average inhabitant to the wealthiest in the county. They included Elizabeth Roberts with 150 acres, Mary Wollard with 740 acres, Mary Bonner with 800 acres, Samuel Johnston with 635 acres, and William Littlejohn with 656 acres. While these participants’ families owned significant quantities of land in the county, the remainder of the participants and their families are not recorded as owning any land.⁴⁸

Another determinant of Chowan County’s wealth in the Revolutionary period was the number of slaves that its inhabitants owned and worked on their land. Although many of them did not own any, those who had the most wealth and power in the colony were dependent on the slave labor of African Americans. Slaves had been used in North Carolina since the

⁴⁷ Mathews, 21.

⁴⁸ 1785 Tax List, Chowan County, Legislative Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina; Mathews, 21-22. I only include the wealth of Chowan County, and this is the earliest tax list that I was able to find. Many of the wealthier inhabitants of the county, including Samuel Johnson, owned land and slaves in other counties.

establishment of the colony, and by 1760, “in the Lower Cape Fear and Albemarle regions, the peculiar institution had become significant.”⁴⁹

The counties in eastern North Carolina were especially reliant on slave labor. In both Chowan and Hanover counties, more than half of the households owned at least one slave while only ten percent of those in Orange and Anson counties owned one. Once again, their numbers were smaller than those of colonies like Virginia, but their cultures were similar. Like them, eastern North Carolinians’ possession of slaves, large houses, and other luxury items was an expression of their wealth and their position in society.⁵⁰

The wealthy citizens of Chowan County owned between 20 and 125 slaves in the Revolutionary period. By 1786, the county was composed of 246 men, 234 women, and 626 African American slaves, totaling 1,106 inhabitants. At this time, the households of eight of the women who had participated in the Edenton Tea Party owned 178 African Americans, almost thirty percent of the slaves. These numbers represent the prominence of approximately one-fifth of the women, but while some of their families owned as much as seven percent of the county’s slave population, the rest of the families owned much less, as little as less than one percent to none of them.⁵¹

The larger households like Samuel Dickinson’s consisted of 7 members and 46 slaves; William Littlejohn’s consisted of 9 members and 40 slaves; and William Bennett’s consisted of 9 members and 34 slaves. The intermediate households like Thomas Barker’s consisted of 2 members and 19 slaves; Ann Anderson’s consisted of 2 members and 11 slaves; and Thomas

⁴⁹ Watson, 8, 30; quoted in Mathews, 7.

⁵⁰ Mathews, 7, 21; Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 249.

⁵¹ Mathews, 21; 1786 Chowan County Census, G.O. 30, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC. The earliest Chowan County census that I was able to find was recorded in 1786.

King's consisted of 9 members and 10 slaves. Finally, the smaller households like Mary Littledale's consisted of 3 members and 4 slaves.⁵²

When the first federal census of the United States of America was taken four years later, the population of Chowan County was divided into the population of Edenton and the population of the remainder of the county, further showing which of the participants' families resided in the urban section of the county and which of them resided in the rural section as well as the wealth of the families in both sections. According to the census, the population of the county had increased to include 600 whites, 34 free blacks, and 941 slaves living in and near approximately 150 homes.⁵³

In addition to including the households of Samuel Dickinson, Penelope Barker, and William Littlejohn in the town's population as the county census had four years prior, the federal census included the household of James Blount, Lydia Bonner's husband, which was composed of eight members and thirty-three slaves. In the remainder of the county, the smaller households like Ann Hall's were composed of four members and six slaves; Sarah Hoskin's was composed of six members and eight slaves; John Beasley's was composed of three members and eight slaves; and Ruth Benbury's was composed of five members and ten slaves.

The intermediate households like Elizabeth Beasley's were composed of five members and twenty slaves; William Roberts's was composed of seven members and twenty-one slaves; and William Jones's, Sarah Howcott's husband, was composed of seven members and twenty-two slaves. The largest household belonged to Samuel Johnston and consisted of six members and ninety-six slaves.⁵⁴ The quantity of slaves the women's families owned can be compared to

⁵² 1786 Chowan County Census.

⁵³ Watson, 58; Parramore, 44.

⁵⁴ *1790 Federal Census* (Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010).

the quantity of land they owned in that they both show the variety of economic and social positions in the Edenton Tea Party.

Like women in the other counties in North Carolina and the other colonies, these women's positions in the Albemarle economy and society depended on that of their parents and the men they married, and those who composed the area's landed gentry were especially like their social equals in their northern neighbor, Virginia. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, one of the few life decisions in which these women had more power than their men was courtship. A woman had the choice of accepting or rejecting her suitor's hand, and every time one made this decision, she affected class structure.⁵⁵

In order to be able to attract a proper suitor and to be able to remarry or remain single after he died, a single woman or widow needed to have a sufficient dower to offer him in marriage. The suitor was also expected to bring ample funds to the marriage. When James Iredell, a leading figure in Edenton in the late eighteenth century, pursued his future wife, Hannah, he was in the process of earning his fortune, but he had not achieved it yet. Conversely, her dower was exceptionally large and included a great deal of land and slaves. He wrote to her, "It is not perhaps very becoming in a young man with so scanty an Income as I have to offer his hand and Heart for a young Lady's Acceptance — I rely Madam, upon your Goodness for an excuse of this Impropriety."⁵⁶

In spite of his lack of fortune, the marriage was arranged. This pleased Iredell, who was attracted to her character as well as her dower. He wrote to his mother in 1772, "How happy should I be, and I may really Add, how happy would you be, to see me married to a Lady of a most excellent understanding, great Goodness of Heart, a most mild and amiable Temper,

⁵⁵ Higginbotham, xxxix; Brown, 248-254.

⁵⁶ Brown, 257; quoted in Watson 57; 56.

admirable prudence, and who in every Action shewed an unerring desire to do her Duty in all the Occurrences of Life.” Such traits also helped to attract suitors. As the *Spectator* described around the same time, love made marriage enjoyable, interests served made marriage simple, and the two combined made marriage happy.⁵⁷

On the other hand, a woman who remained single retained more control over her possessions, but she was looked down on for not fulfilling her duty to marry and reproduce for the benefit of the colony. This mindset was present as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century. At that time, Lawson observed that North Carolina women were “well featured” and that this gave them an advantage in attracting potential husbands. He goes on to say that while many of them married young, as young as thirteen or fourteen years old, “She that stays till Twenty is reckoned a Stale Maid.”⁵⁸

According to the marriage records, seventeen of the women who participated in the Edenton Tea Party were married or remarried in North Carolina in the mid to late eighteenth century. More than twenty years before the Revolution began, John and Elizabeth Vail, Mrs. Mary Haughton and Levi Creecy, Thomas and Elizabeth King, Mary and Peter Payne, John and Sarah Beasley, Thomas and Mary Bonner, and Jasper and Abigail Charlton were all married between 1748 and 1757. In the decade that preceded the tea party, Mrs. Elizabeth Bonner and William Roberts, George and Marian Wells, Robert and Elizabeth Patterson, William and Sarah Howcott, and John and Anne Haughton were all married between 1767 and 1774.⁵⁹

The remaining women, Lydia Bonner, Mary Hunter, Mary Blount, Teresa Cunningham, and Elizabeth Creecy were all married between 1775 and 1785, in the decade of the Revolution

⁵⁷ Quoted in Higginbotham, 123; Brown, 257.

⁵⁸ Smith, 41; quoted in Parramore, 13.

⁵⁹ William Montgomery Clemens, ed., *North and South Carolina Marriage Records: From the Earliest Colonial Days to the Civil War* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 25-282.

that followed the tea party. In addition to the marriage records, James Iredell recorded that Margaret and John Pearson, Elizabeth and John Johnston, and Sarah and Arthur Howe were married, and Elizabeth Moore wrote that Lydia and William Bennet were married. The only two women in the records who never married were Isabel and Anne Johnston.⁶⁰

Don Higginbotham points out the “incredible extent to which [the members of eastern North Carolina’s upper class] had intermarried.” Such marriage patterns resulted in the mixing of the extended families into a community. This process was unique to the southern colonies. Whereas white European and New England yeomen lived in condensed villages, inhabitants of the South did not. Southern colonies’ “distinctive sense of community was equally central to their world view.”⁶¹

This was the case in both eastern and western North Carolina, where the idea of “family existence” was both widespread and modern. Because the population was scattered and the houses were small, the families were closer knit. This was one of the initial reasons why James Iredell was attracted to the Johnston family, into which he later married. He admired how the members’ love for each other constantly brought them together, both the immediate family and the extended family.⁶²

Such an affectionate family life was not unique to the Johnston family. Many other families in the colony were similar in their nature, including many more relating to the women who participated in the Edenton Tea Party. These families identified more with their community and its religious congregation than they did with their colony or state, but there were times when

⁶⁰ Clemens, 35-140; Higginbotham, 364, 286, 485; Moore, 39; John H. Wheeler, *Reminiscences and Memoirs of North Carolina and Eminent North Carolinians* (Columbus: Columbus Printing Works, 1884), 120.

⁶¹ Quoted in Higginbotham, xlv; quoted in Watson, 27; 1.

⁶² Quoted in Watson, 26; Mathews, 53.

such identification put a great amount of pressure on its individuals “to live and to think by a community census.”⁶³ The Revolution was one of these times.

The Revolution pitted those who were loyal to the British crown against those who were not, and only New York had a larger Loyalist population than North Carolina, making the latter the most loyal colony in the South. Taking this a step further, Robert DeMond argues that there were probably more Loyalists in North Carolina than there were in any other colony and that the colony’s Loyalists were more successful than those in any other colony.⁶⁴

This was the case in the eastern part of the colony as well as the western part. One reason for this is found in the 1790 census: more persons of English descent lived in the coastal region of the colony. Like the majority of businessmen in North Carolina, most of its inhabitants, including those in the Albemarle region, were loyal to Great Britain, probably for financial reasons. However, Edenton and the Cape Fear region were exceptions. Men like Joseph Hewes and Joseph Blount of Edenton, the first being engaged to one of the women of the Edenton Tea Party and the second being married to one, are notable examples of businessmen who did not support the crown. Furthermore, the women who participated in the Edenton and Wilmington tea parties were certainly not sympathetic to the British cause.⁶⁵

Little about the Loyalists of Chowan County, especially the female portion of their population, is found in the records. There was at least one Loyalist family in Edenton and at least one in the surrounding county. This is evident in the fact that Edenton was one of the seven towns that sold land confiscated from Loyalists in 1779. This land was sold in 1782, including

⁶³ Mathews, 36; quoted in Watson, 27.

⁶⁴ Robert O. Demond, *The Loyalists in North Carolina During the Revolution* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, Co., Inc., 1979), vii.

⁶⁵ Mathews, 5; DeMond, 54.

the owner(s)' "Negroes and horses." In addition, Chowan County was one of the twenty-nine counties that confiscated and sold Loyalist property between June of 1784 and 1787.⁶⁶

Apart from such facts, it is difficult to determine much about the Loyalist portion of the county, other than its inferiority to the Patriot portion in manpower and influence. As for the women of the county, they were associated with whichever side their husbands supported, Whig or Tory. Because the men and women of Edenton were so public and powerful in their support of independence from Great Britain, the Loyalist women likely suffered much in this area.

On the other hand, the male relatives of the Edenton Tea Party women controlled much of the government and commerce of the area. The officers of the county court, the justices of the peace, and the sheriff ran the local governments of North Carolina, and Thomas Bonner was a judge in Chowan County court as well as a justice of the peace in the county with Joseph Blount, John Benbury, Edward Vail, Joseph Hewes, John Beasley, James Blount, and Jacob Hunter, all related to the tea party's women, only six months before their Tea Party took place. In addition, John Johnston, Thomas Benbury, Joseph Jones, and Charles Blount were appointed members of the Edenton District's Committee of Safety the following year, and this group of men had the power to defend the area against the royal government.⁶⁷

Other women's husbands played a more direct part in the defense of the Patriot population of the colonies. Some, like Rebecca Bondfield's husband, prepared the rebel forces to fight the British. Charles Bondfield was appointed to fit out armed vessels at the Fort of Edenton in November of 1777. Others led and/or fought in the battles of the Revolutionary War. Edward

⁶⁶ DeMond, 162-163, 58.

⁶⁷ Butler, 2; Higginbotham, 475; Appointment of justices of the peace of Chowan County, 1775, Chowan County Papers, C.R.024.928.15, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC, xv; John H. Wheeler, *Historical Sketches of North Carolina, From 1584-1851* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1851), 73.

Vail was listed as the commander of the Edenton District battalion in 1775, and James Blount, brother of Mary and husband of Anne Hall, was a colonel in the militia.⁶⁸

Other women's relatives played important political roles in the war for independence. John Benbury was "an early and active friend to the cause of the [Patriot] people." He represented Chowan County in the legislature from 1774 to 1781, and he was the Speaker of the House from 1778 to 1780 and in 1782. Another, Thomas Jones, was a member of the Provincial Congress as well as a framer of the State Constitution in 1776.⁶⁹

Another leading political figure was Samuel Johnston of Edenton. Historian R. D. W. Connor argues that he, John Harvey, Cornelius Harnett, and Richard Caswell, were "embodiments of the thoughts, the sentiments, and the ideals of the [Patriot] people of North Carolina." Johnston was the son of Scots Samuel and Helen Johnston, and his siblings were Jean (Blair), John, Penelope (Stewart), Hannah (Iredell), and Isabel (almost Hewes). The family moved to Edenton in 1754, where Samuel studied law under Thomas Barker, husband of Penelope.⁷⁰

It was around this time that Johnston met and married Frances Cathcart, the sister of Margaret Cathcart. Margaret, also known as Peggy, had married a local physician, William McKenzie, and later signed the Edenton Tea Party Resolves. When her husband died in 1773, his

⁶⁸ Higginbotham, 475; Walter Clark, ed., *The State Records of North Carolina: Volume II* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 674; Wheeler, *Sketches*, 72; Moore, 75; Lemmon, 32; Moore, 63. Anne Hall's father, Rev. Clement Hall, was Frances Hall's husband.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 123; Finding aid, Charles E. Johnson Collection, P.C.67.1, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

⁷⁰ Quoted in R. D. W. Connor, *Revolutionary Leaders of North Carolina* (North Carolina: North Carolina State, 1916), 24; John G. Zehmer, *Hayes: The Plantation, Its People, and Their Papers* (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, 2007), 1; Parramore; 26.

tombstone was engraved, “Here are deposited the remains of William Cathcart, M. D. died...Adorned with many virtues, stained with no crimes, His memory pure and unspotted.”⁷¹

Like William Cathcart, Samuel Johnston was seen as having many virtues. James Iredell described him as “superior to most (his equal hardly can be found) in the integrity of his Heart and Conduct.” By the time he was forty years old, he had served several terms in the Assembly, was the deputy naval officer for his province, and had been Clerk of the Superior Court since 1769. Consequentially, his house at the Hayes Plantation and its library was said to be the most impressive in the area, and he and his family lived there for about twenty years, when he was not away on one of his many lengthy business trips.⁷² Such absences were beneficial to the colonies, but they must have been difficult for Frances and their children.

Samuel Johnston’s sister, Isabel, participated in the Tea Party and died while engaged to Joseph Hewes, another leading political figure in Edenton as well as a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He had moved to Edenton from New Jersey, not long after Samuel, in order to take part in the town’s maritime economy, and by 1773, he was one of Edenton’s leading businessmen. James Iredell recorded in July of 1772 that Hewes was one of his favorite people, “as indeed he is of every body.”⁷³

Sadly, Isabel Johnston’s death broke his heart, and as Iredell predicted, Hewes never asked for another woman’s hand. This tragedy, along with his poor health, is believed to have caused his early death. He described his declining health in March of 1777 in a letter to Governor Caswell as preventing him from meeting his political obligations, “I fully intended to have set out for the Congress in Feb’ry, but I have been so much indisposed...I did not think it prudent to

⁷¹ Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 120; Higginbotham, 286, 477; quoted in Wilma Cartwright Spencer, ed., *Tombstones and Epitaphs of Northeastern North Carolina* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, Inc., 1973), 64.

⁷² Higginbotham, 109; Parramore, 29; Mathews, 22; Zehmer, 2.

⁷³ Dillard, 13; Parramore, 26-27; Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 122; quoted in Higginbotham, 107.

engage with a more northern climate.” Ironically, two years later, he died in that very place. In his will, he left 150 pounds to George and Jean Blair’s daughter, Peggy, and he appointed Samuel Johnston, James Iredell, Charles Bondfield, and Walter Ferguson, three of whom were related to the tea party women, executors of his will.⁷⁴

Hewes’ close friend, James Iredell, was also a leading political figure in Edenton. He had been born into a poor family in Bristol, England and moved to Edenton in the 1760s to collect royal customs for the Port of Roanoke. He later began to study law under Samuel Johnston, and two years later, he began practicing it in the town. While he was advancing in its society, he met and married Johnston’s younger sister, Hannah, who was a sister of one of the Tea Party’s signers.⁷⁵

Hannah Iredell wrote that her family was “the first in this country in every respect,” an exaggeration, but her fortune was certainly more than proper, and by 1786, their household was composed of eight members and fourteen African American slaves. Four of the members were the children of James and Hannah, and it is evident in his letters that he cared for his family a great deal. He died at the age of forty-eight, and his tombstone read, “In memory of James Iredell [...] having filled honorably to himself and usefully to his country various important civil offices [...] he was exemplary in purity of his life And most affectionate, kind and benevolent in all his domesticated social relations.”⁷⁶ He had supported the Patriot cause, going as far as writing political pamphlets, and risen from lawyer to attorney general to Supreme Court justice in the United States. His service to North Carolina, as a colony and as a state, was invaluable.

⁷⁴ Parramore, 28, 36; Higginbotham, 107; quoted in Clark, 435; Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 122; Will, Joseph Hewes, 1778, “Cupola House Papers”: Estates Records, Guardians’ Records, and Wills, 1744-1834, n.d., C.R.024.928.40, Chowan County Records, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

⁷⁵ Watson, 56; Parramore, 26, 28; Mathews, 29.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Mathews, 27; 1786 Chowan County Census; Watson, 81; Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 123; quoted in Spencer, 63.

The uniting of the Iredell and Johnston families was not unique. It was common for the families of merchants, lawyers, and planters in eastern North Carolina to socialize and intermarry, and it was these families that controlled the political and economic activity of the colony. They composed most of the Assembly and were appointed to most of the other positions in the colony's government. They also had a smaller role in controlling its religious and social activities, including education. Watson points out that these three leading groups were united in towns and that they looked out for each other as a result.⁷⁷ This caused their women's lives to be tied together in a similar fashion, and one of the results of this interaction during the Revolutionary period was the Edenton Tea Party.

The merchants were the most powerful of the three groups in Edenton because the needs of the majority of the inhabitants of the town were met by a small number of merchants. Between 1746 and 1777, merchants like Joseph Hewes and his partner Robert Smith owned and ran their businesses out of The Homestead, an unadorned two-story building that is still standing in the town. Furthermore, Thomas Barker, Charles Blount, and Joseph Hewes had created the first business in Chowan County, and all three were tied to at least one of the Tea Party's women. Other Edenton businesses owned by the signer's families included Horniblow's Tavern and that of Elizabeth King's husband, Thomas, who was another of the leading merchants in the town.⁷⁸

The second most influential group was the lawyers, and the longest practicing of them in Edenton was Thomas Barker. He trained Samuel Johnston to practice law, and Johnston did the same for James Iredell. He, too, had moved to Edenton from the North and, not long before the Revolution began, he was appointed North Carolina's agent to Great Britain. He also served as a

⁷⁷ Watson, 57. In addition, Harlow Giles Unger points out that 30 of the members of the 1st Continental Congress were lawyers and 11 of them were merchants in *American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution*.

⁷⁸ Watson, 54; Moore, 11, 48; Mathews, 16; Higginbotham, xliii; Dillard, 13.

justice of the peace for a neighboring county, assemblyman for Edenton and Chowan County, a colonial treasurer, and a customs officer for the port of Roanoke. As a result of his relationship with Governor Johnston and his service to the colony, he and his more famous wife were later buried in Johnston's graveyard at his Hayes Plantation.⁷⁹

The education of Edenton's inhabitants, male and female, contributed to their success. The town's records show that its inhabitants were up to date on the literature of their time as well as previous works of importance. Surprisingly, the men did not show antipathy towards the education of their women. A letter James Iredell wrote in 1772 showed respect towards his fiance's learning, "Her Understanding is uncommonly excellent, and it has been improved by much useful and elegant Reading." In another letter, which he later wrote to her, he takes it a step further by disapproving of women reading less practical literature, or "those of frothy Entertainment."⁸⁰ Another indicator of the level of the education of the women in the area is that the fifty-one women were able to sign their names to the Edenton Tea Party Resolves two years later.

The Edenton Free School was established by the Assembly in 1770, and it was run by Daniel Earl prior to 1773 and Charles Pettigrew, husband of Mary Blount, in the years that followed. As was common in the region in this period, such education was reserved for the young men and women of the upper classes, and non-elite women and slaves were usually not formally educated. This, along with other social factors, shaped the composition of the Tea Party.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Parramore, 26; Watson, 54; Dillard, 12. Abigail Charlton's husband, Jasper, was another one of the leading lawyers in Edenton.

⁸⁰ Higginbotham, xlv, 121, 149.

⁸¹ Mathews, 55-56; Higginbotham, xli.

Wealth was also shown in the social activities of the town, especially in balls. Watson best sums this up, “The lavish balls, where dancing occurred, were further arenas for gentlemen and their ladies to display their finery and to size up each other’s power.” Many such dances, along with many of the other social activities of Edenton, were held on the second floor of the Chowan County Courthouse. Others were held at the homes of the most prominent citizens. In 1772, Mrs. Mary Jones hosted a ball for friends like Mrs. Sarah Littlejohn and Mary Blount as well as the rest of the town’s gentry. The Johnstons also hosted a ball at Hayes Plantation the same year, and in January of 1773, James Iredell escorted some of the town’s young ladies to another ball held at one of the Johnstons’ plantations.⁸²

The women of the town shared in the good times as well as the bad. Despite the prominence of many of the Edenton Tea Party’s women, others were less fortunate, and they all represented the fundamental female struggles that were magnified during the Revolutionary period, from a Patriot point of view. Many had no choice but to provide for, manage, and defend their families, homes, and land in the absence and death of their fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers as well as fulfill their domestic duties, the most important of which was birthing and raising their children, most of who did not survive childhood. Such heartbreaks were not limited to a specific economic, social, or political position. Where the women of the Edenton Tea Party were different was in the more unified and publicly defiant response to the intensification of such struggles and others on the part of the British.

Despite the excessive optimism of the 1773 pamphlet advertising North Carolina to Scottish immigrants, there is truth in one of its declarations, “A rising colony is always reckoned

⁸² Watson, 79; Iredell, xli; Pettigrew, 11-12, 32.

a proper field for the honest, industrious merchant to prosper.”⁸³ It was certainly true in eighteenth-century Edenton. The economic, social, and political advancement of men like Samuel Johnston, James Iredell, and Joseph Hewes as well as their families is evidence of this.

Such men were attracted to the town by its reputation of increasing opportunity and prosperity before and during the Revolutionary period, and as a result of their work in it, Edenton’s influence in the colony increased. According to the state constitution’s distribution of representation in 1776, Edenton had become one of the six most important towns in North Carolina at that time. Higginbotham sums up the town’s significance, “What was true generally of North Carolina elite could be viewed most explicitly in microcosm in the town of Edenton and the surrounding area of which it served as the political, cultural, and economic center.”⁸⁴ If the town had not risen to such a position in the colony and attracted such talented, wealthy, and Patriotic men, the Edenton Tea Party might not have taken place among their women.

⁸³ Boyd, “Informations,” 450.

⁸⁴ Parramore, 26-27; Higginbotham, xl. Edenton was one of six towns that were given two additional representatives in the North Carolina’s House of Commons.

CHAPTER 3

TEA PARTY

“We may destroy all the men in America,
and we shall still have all we can do to defeat the women.”⁸⁵

Lord Charles Cornwallis

The motivation of the Edenton Tea Party, like most of the American colonists' acts of rebellion against their motherland in the Revolutionary period, can be traced back to the end of the French and Indian War. When combined with the king's excessive spending habits, the cost of it and the other recent wars Great Britain had participated in left the country in great need of money. It was then that the government increased its taxation and restriction of the colonies. This affected some colonies more than others, and North Carolina was one of those most affected. Despite the large Loyalist population of the colony, the rebellion of towns like Edenton was more pronounced than that of many of the other colonies.

Parliament passed the first of the new taxes, the Sugar Act, in April of 1764. It cut the tax on foreign molasses in half, increased the tax on foreign sugar, outlawed foreign rum, and taxed imported pimientos, wines, indigo, and coffee. When news of the act reached North Carolina that summer, its Assembly did not hesitate to voice opposition to it and the coming Stamp Act. Five months later, the Currency Act of 1764 increased the weight of the already heavy tax burden on the colonial provinces by further limiting credit in the colonies. From Massachusetts to South

⁸⁵ Roberts, xix.

Carolina, merchants complained to their agents in Great Britain about the act. “The storm clouds in New England were spreading down the Atlantic.”⁸⁶

The turning point in North Carolina’s support of its mother country was Parliament’s passing of the ill-fated Stamp Act in March of 1765. Up until then, British taxation had not significantly affected the colony. The act required the purchase and placement of stamps on most papers of significance in the colonies. Because this affected most, if not all, of the colonists’ finances, they opposed it vehemently, and by the time the act took effect eight months later, North Carolina and the other colonies’ stamp officers had been forced to step down.⁸⁷

Historian Harlow Unger argues that George Grenville’s greatest mistake was his failure to recognize how much the Stamp Act would cost the three most powerful groups in the colonies: lawyers, merchants, and publishers and that their shared struggles, caused by the tax, united the three groups.⁸⁸ This was certainly true in Edenton, where lawyers and merchants controlled much of the politics of the town and the colony, and it was later reiterated in the actions of Chowan County’s women.

North Carolina’s opposition to Parliament’s new taxes became violent that October, and it was centered in the coastal section of the colony. Men from Wilmington led two protests that month, and men from Edenton, New Bern, and Brunswick, all of whom were coastal neighbors, lent them a hand. Another uprising Governor William Tryon faced was a riot in Edenton. “It was natural that the opposition should center itself in the Cape Fear section, for here was centered the trade of the colony.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Butler, 10; quoted in Harlow Giles Unger, *American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2011), 89; 66.

⁸⁷ Hugh F. Rankin, *North Carolina in the American Revolution* (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1959), 1-2; Butler, 15; Unger, 86.

⁸⁸ Unger, 52.

⁸⁹ Quoted in DeMond, 14; Parramore, 30.

The area's "Pledge to Violate the Stamp Act" was published in the *North Carolina Gazette* (Wilmington) in February of the following year, declaring its intention to continue its protest until the act was repealed. It read, "We are ready and willing, at the expense of our lives and fortunes to defend, being fully convinced of the oppressive and arbitrary tendency of a late Act of Parliament [...] hereby mutually and solemnly plight our faith and honour, that we will at any risque whatever, and whenever called upon, unite, and truly and faithfully assist each other, to the best of our Power, in preventing entirely the operation of the Stamp Act." Historian Lindley Butler argues that the area's organization of opposition to the act during those five months was the starting point of North Carolina's organization of opposition to the crown, which culminated in the Revolution.⁹⁰

Because of such protest throughout the colonies, the Stamp Act was repealed in March of 1766. In its place, the Declaratory Act was passed. This act was bittersweet for North Carolinians as well as the inhabitants of the other colonies. The Stamp Act had been abolished, but Parliament had again declared that it had the right to tax the colonies on its own terms. The Declaratory Act was followed by the Townshend Acts, which went into effect in November of the next year. The Townshend Acts taxed tea, paper, lead, and glass. Historians agree that these acts were the last straw for the colonists, and that they were the turning point toward the war for independence. This was true in North Carolina. "Discontent was then rife throughout the province."⁹¹

At the fall meeting of the North Carolina Assembly, the men drew up resolves, which declared that the right to tax their colony was exclusively theirs. Like other colonies, they

⁹⁰ Quoted in "A Pledge to Violate the Stamp Act," *North Carolina Gazette* (Wilmington), February 26, 1766, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4257> (accessed 19 December 2011); Butler, 24.

⁹¹ Quoted in Boyd, "Table of Taxables and Taxes Paid 1748-1770," 415.

resolved to no longer import British goods. As a result, trade in the colonies decreased to the point that Parliament repealed all of the Townshend Acts except the tax on tea, “three pence per pound,” in March of 1770.⁹²

North Carolina’s opposition to British taxes and rule progressed in the years that followed the passing of the Stamp Act. In 1771, General Thomas Gage wrote to the Earl of Hillsborough, “We have had accounts of uncommon disturbances amongst the inhabitants of North Carolina.” Such rebellion was observed in the colony throughout the subsequent decade. One reason for the discontent in North Carolina was the corruption of its local officials, sheriffs, and public treasurers. Such greediness and other factors caused the tax burden on North Carolinians to be much heavier than that in other colonies despite the superiority of other colonies’ wealth.⁹³

Despite such limitations, the people of the colony supported cities like Boston in their opposition to Great Britain when others did not. The Boston Tea Party of 1773 was the first and boldest of its kind, and the British made an example of it by punishing the city with more imposing acts and closing its port. While colonists in New York, Philadelphia, and Virginia disapproved of the tea party, those in Chowan County supported it and the town in its aftermath.⁹⁴

North Carolinians supported the cause of Boston because they equated it to the cause of America. The North Carolina Committee of Correspondence wrote to the Virginia Committee of Correspondence in the summer of 1774 and urged their northern neighbor to join them in their support of Boston in spite of their disagreement with the town’s tea party. The sender made the

⁹² Quoted in Butler, 27.

⁹³ Quoted in Butler, 29; 33.

⁹⁴ Unger, 181-183.

case that an attempt on the rights of one colony should be considered an attempt on the rights of all of the colonies and that the colonies' responses decided the "fate of American Liberty." North Carolina had formed their Committee of Correspondence earlier that year in order to keep in touch with the other colonies and their actions concerning the British. Its members included Samuel Johnston and Joseph Hewes of Edenton.⁹⁵

Because the North Carolina Assembly opposed British taxes, Governor Martin had dissolved it in March of 1774. However, this did not stop men like Samuel Johnston from meeting to accomplish its goals. One of these meetings was held at Hillsborough, and when Martin learned of it, Johnston defended his leading part in it in a letter to the governor, "I was a mere instrument on this occasion under the direction of the people, a people among whom I have long resided who have on all occasions placed the greatest confidence in me to whose [favorable] opinion I owe everything I possess and to whom I am bound by gratitude [...] to render every service they can demand of me in [defense] of what they esteem their just rights at the [risk] of my life and property."⁹⁶

The following August, the inhabitants of Chowan County, like those of the other counties, met to elect representatives to send to the first provincial convention. The meeting encouraged opposition to Parliamentary taxation as well as British treatment of Boston, importation, and the slave trade. It also encouraged the establishment and action of local committees of correspondence in addition to those established on the colony level.⁹⁷

On August 25, 1774, the First Provincial Congress of North Carolina met and passed resolutions against British taxes, Parliamentary rule, East India imports, especially tea, exports to

⁹⁵ Quoted in Clark, 247; 246.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Clark, 258.

⁹⁷ Butler, 53.

Great Britain, and the slave trade. They also resolved that colonies, cities, and towns that opposed the future decisions of the Continental Congress would be blacklisted. Finally, they passed resolutions for trial by jury in the colonies and the meeting of the First Continental Congress, which was scheduled for the following month in Philadelphia. Samuel Johnston, Thomas Oldham, Thomas Benbury, Thomas Jones, and Thomas Hunter signed the resolutions as representatives of Edenton.⁹⁸

Historians agree that the meeting of the First Provincial Congress “fully launched North Carolina into the revolutionary movement.” When the First Continental Congress met in September, Governor Josiah Martin, who had replaced Governor Tryon three years prior, was not able to prevent Joseph Hewes, Richard Caswell, and William Hooper from representing their colony at Philadelphia. There, the representatives of the colonies planned their subsequent opposition to the British.⁹⁹

The First Provincial Congress’s next step was the organization of Committees of Safety in all of the counties in North Carolina. These groups monitored prices, imports, the slave trade, their communities’ morals, and its defense. These Committees of Safety were under the control of Councils of Safety, which consisted of thirteen persons who were in charge of the army. The Congress entrusted the councils with the power to “act for the strengthening, securing, and defending the Colony, against the attempts of external and internal enemies.” It was not long before these committees controlled local and provincial government in North Carolina. The members of the Chowan County Committee of Safety included Joseph Hewes, Jasper Charlton,

⁹⁸ “The First Provincial Congress,” The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4332> (accessed 20 December 2011).

⁹⁹ Quoted in Butler, 54; Parramore, 30-31.

William Bennet, Charles Bondfield, and Thomas Jones, all of whom were related to Edenton Tea Party women.¹⁰⁰

Before the French and Indian War, the colonists had largely governed themselves. To many of them, trading was as much a right as breathing, as were their rights as Englishmen.¹⁰¹ They felt their sacrifice in the previous war did not merit their mother country's withdrawal of such rights. This explains many of the colonists' rejection of subsequent British acts and trade. Women like those who participated in the Edenton Tea Party were important in this opposition, as their men were.

The most common way colonial women expressed their opinion of a political situation was through petitions. They did so "with the biblical Esther as role model and a strong English constitutional tradition for justification."¹⁰² In petitions, women requested that their leaders amend their situation in some way in order to improve it. None of the petitions presented to the British by colonial women in the decade that preceded the Revolution are known to have been granted, but their effort was noticeable.

In addition to petitions, many colonial women supported their men's decisions to no longer import or consume British goods, especially tea. While such action in the North was focused on East India tea, the women in the South, including the women in Edenton, took their boycotting a step further. Many of them did not limit their opposition to tea. Instead, they rejected British goods in general.¹⁰³

In order to survive without British goods, the colonists had to rely on their own resources. Historian Richard Dillard points out that at this time women began to produce many of the items

¹⁰⁰ Butler, 54-55; quoted in Clark, 265; Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 17.

¹⁰¹ Unger, 48.

¹⁰² Quoted in Kerber, 85.

¹⁰³ Norton, 161.

that the colonies needed out of their own resources instead of buying them. This was true in Edenton as well as many other towns throughout the colonies. Historian Edith Patterson Meyer argues that the French and Indian War prepared female colonists for the Revolution. Because the women had faced similar circumstances in the previous war, they were better prepared to accomplish such tasks than they might have otherwise been.¹⁰⁴

The Marquis de Lafayette's response to an invitation to attend a ball in Baltimore illustrates how the significance of women's domestic production of necessities changed their role in the colonies. The French leader's reply read, "You are very handsome; you dance very prettily; your ball is very fine — but my soldiers have no shirts."¹⁰⁵ Obviously, colonial women's appearances as well as their social abilities were no longer as important as their ability to furnish their men with the items the latter needed to survive as an enemy of Great Britain.

Despite the challenges that came with many Southern women's rejection of British goods in general, the greatest test of consumption behavior was the boycott of tea. Three years after Parliament repealed all of the Townshend Acts except the Tea Act, it had authorized the East India Company to monopolize the sale of tea in America. This stripped many merchants and shopkeepers of much of their business.¹⁰⁶

By that time, tea had become popular among upper class women in the colonies because of its popularity among British aristocrats and royalty. "Advice in the Choice of a Husband," a letter written in the mid to late 1750s to a colonial woman named Chloe, was published in the *North Carolina Magazine* in 1764. It included tea drinking in the qualities that attracted a husband, "Learn'd to compliment by rule; Learn'd how to [dress], and how to dance; Can tell

¹⁰⁴ Dillard, 13; Meyer, 18.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Cometti, 334.

¹⁰⁶ Kerber, 39; Unger, 158.

what mode came last from France; Can cut a fowl the [modish] way, And knows the art of drinking tea. On these acquirements, when compounded, is a female education grounded.” A woman who drank tea was also recognized as not having to work as much as lower class women.¹⁰⁷

Although tea was not as popular with male colonists as it was with females, men in many cities, including Edenton, drank it with women on several occasions in the years before the boycott. In 1772, James Iredell recorded that he drank tea with men and women in the town on at least four different occasions: once with Mr. Johnston and Mr. Charlton in November, once with Mr. Horniblow, which included “much tea drinking,” and twice with Mrs. Penelope Barker at her home.¹⁰⁸

Another reason for tea’s popularity was its health benefits. Unger compares it to the less popular drinks of the time, “Unlike fresh water or milk, tea was safe, tasty, and settled the stomach.” Colonists also drank it for the reasons they drank alcoholic beverages. The main type of tea that the colonists drank was black tea, or Bohea, which was imported from India. Because the black tea contained thine, it had an intoxicating effect when it was drunk in large quantities. Many colonists enjoyed this side effect of the tea.¹⁰⁹

Because tea was a popular beverage in the colonies, colonists resented Parliament’s taxation and the East India Company’s monopoly of it. By the time of the Boston Tea Party, tea had become a symbol of Britain’s “big government taxation.” Historian Hugh Rankin points out that the Bostonians’ famous demonstration set the pattern for subsequent tea parties in northern cities including Philadelphia and New York. In these demonstrations, colonists either burned

¹⁰⁷ Unger, 101; quoted in Benjamin Martin, ed., *Miscellaneous Correspondence, Containing a Variety of Subjects, Volume II: For the Year 1757 and 1758* (London: W. Owen, n.d), 486; Smith, 37.

¹⁰⁸ Higginbotham, 173-189; quoted in Lemmon, 11.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Unger, 123; Dillard, 8-9.

their tea or dumped it into their waters like their counterparts in Boston, instead of selling or consuming the herbs. Some cities took this a step further by banning tea drinking within their city limits.¹¹⁰

The only tea party historians list as a successor of the Boston Tea Party in the South, apart from Charleston, is the one that took place among Edenton's women less than a year later. Since the late 1760s, many women in Boston and Philadelphia had been boycotting tea. "A Lady's Adieu to Her Tea Table," the best-known poem concerning women's role in the tea boycott of the Revolutionary period, was printed in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* in February of 1774:

Farewell the tea-board, with its gaudy equipage
Of cups and saucers, cream bucket, sugar tongs,
The pretty tea-chest also, lately stored
With Hyson, Congo, and best double-fine.
Full many a joyous moment have I sat by ye,
Hearing the girls tattle, the old maids talk scandal,
And the spruce coxcomb laugh at — may be — nothing.
No more shall I dish out the once loved liquor,
Though now detestable,
Because I am taught (and I believe its true)
Its use will fasten slavish chains upon my country,
And Liberty's the goddess I would choose
To reign triumphant in America.

This poem shows women's reasons for boycotting tea as well as the sacrifice they felt they were making in doing so.¹¹¹

Many women equated their colonies' lack of representation in the British government to slavery and their opposition to such tyranny as key to maintaining their liberty, as many men did. In another poem on this subject, Milcah Martha Moore of Philadelphia wrote, "Tho' we've no Voice [...] stand firmly resolved and bid Grenville to see that rather than Freedom, we'll part

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Unger, 162; 3, 174-175; Rankin, 4.

¹¹¹ Unger, 131; quoted in Benson J. Lossing, *The American Historical Record and Repertory of Notes and Queries, Volume I* (Philadelphia: Chase & Town Publishers, 1872), 509.

with our Tea.” For these reasons, the circulation of this and other poems encouraged women to boycott tea and brew the alternatives: raspberry bush leaves, labradore, and coffee.¹¹²

While women in many colonial towns joined their men in their boycott of British goods, two groups of women in two towns along the coast of North Carolina took their support of the Patriot cause a step further. The first of these was a group of women who held a “tea party” in Wilmington. The town had closed its ports to British trade to prevent a tea monopoly, and its women were in support of this decision.¹¹³

It is not known exactly how many women participated in the Wilmington Tea Party or when it took place. The only record of its occurrence is found in the journal of Janet Schaw, an Englishwoman who visited North Carolina in 1774. According to her account of the demonstration, it took place between March 25 and April 5. She wrote, “The Ladies have burnt their tea in solemn procession but they had delayed however till the sacrifice was not very considerable, as I do not think any one offered above a quarter of a pound.” Despite the observer’s notable downplay of the demonstration, the women’s actions were significant. They were the first female group to be recorded as publicly disposing of a British good for a political purpose. Historian Troy Kickler’s article, “The Wilmington Tea Party,” is the only secondary account of the event, and he argues that it played a part in the victory and establishment of the United States.¹¹⁴

Less than seven months later, another group of women held a “tea party” some two hundred miles to the north, and it is likely that it was influenced by its predecessor to the south. In Edenton, most of the inhabitants supported the Patriot cause, even though the area around

¹¹² Quoted in Kerber, 38; Unger, 131.

¹¹³ Troy Kickler, “Wilmington Tea Party,” <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/33/entry> (accessed 31 October 2010), 1.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Schaw, 155; Kickler, 1.

them and the other constituents of the Cape Fear region were surrounded by a majority of men and women who supported and defended their mother country.¹¹⁵

Edenton and other North Carolina port towns were also divergent in their extraordinary support of Boston. In the wake of the most famous tea party and the closing of the port involved, these towns collected relief supplies and shipped them to Boston while most of the rest of the South did not defend the city's actions. Previously described, Edenton's location gave it an advantage in shipping against the will of Great Britain then as well as later in the Revolution. Some of the supplies from the town were sent on the *Penelope*, but it is not known whether the ship's name had anything to do with the notorious president of the Edenton Tea Party.¹¹⁶

In addition to the shipping of supplies to Boston, the women of Edenton held a tea party that resembled its Massachusetts precedent in some ways but differed in many others. Like their men, they supported the resolutions of the First Provincial Congress. Historian Betsy Erkkila argues that female rebellion against the crown, like that of the Edenton Tea Party, was decriminalized by previous male rebellion like that of the Sons of Liberty, their ideologies and their actions. Under their influence, women in the colonies began to act as rebellious groups, with and without violence.¹¹⁷

The women who participated in the Edenton Tea Party understood that to rebel against British authority was to risk their reputations as well as their lives and property. Historian William Powell points out that it is likely that Penelope Barker was more aware of the risk than the others because her husband was a colonial agent.¹¹⁸ Thomas Barker was quite familiar with Great Britain, having spent the thirteen years prior to his wife's tea party and the four years that

¹¹⁵ Parramore, 35.

¹¹⁶ Unger, 173; Parramore, 30-31.

¹¹⁷ Erkkila, 189.

¹¹⁸ Powell, 96.

followed it there, in the country that the women of his hometown were opposing. It is a wonder that neither husband nor wife, nor the dozens of other families involved, were harmed for her actions during that time, especially after her signature was included with the Edenton Tea Party Resolves when they appeared in London newspapers in early 1775.

The participating women risked more than others had because they had much to give to the Revolutionary cause. To be able to plan and carry out their tea party, they had to be knowledgeable Patriots with the support of the men of their county. Furthermore, in order to obtain and dispose of East India tea and other British goods, they had to be wealthy. If the town's port-based prosperity had not attracted such talented, wealthy, powerful, and Patriotic men, the Edenton Tea Party might not have taken place among their women.

By the time of their demonstration, the Albemarle region had been settled for a century, and Edenton was half a century old. Dillard describes the culture of its society as rivaling that of Williamsburg, Virginia. One reason for this was its location. Edenton is located on a vertical path that passes through Brunswick, Wilmington, New Bern, Bath, and Petersburg. In addition, it is located near various large bodies of water. Since the 1600s, buildings near water had served as meeting places for government and community groups. It was easier for members of powerful families like the Johnstons and the Blounts, many of whom lived on the plantations outside Edenton, to travel to town by boat instead of land, as long as the weather was accommodating.¹¹⁹ Such advantages likely affected the location and the participating population of the town's tea party.

The participating population was also affected by the social standards of the southern colonies at that time. As historian Kathleen Brown points out in her study of eighteenth century

¹¹⁹ Dillard, 8; Lemmon, 9; Smith, 25.

women in Virginia, the circumstances of widows and wealthy women, who were the majority of the Edenton Tea Party, encouraged them to be involved in “the world of men” while the public lives of other white women were limited to heterosexual gatherings like balls and church services.¹²⁰

Because tea parties were one of the most popular ways for wealthy women to entertain female guests in both England and the American colonies in the decade that preceded the Revolution, women like those in Edenton had held them often before the meeting of the First Provincial Congress. The women are recorded as having enjoyed these gatherings. Hannah Iredell’s tea parties even “relieved what she sometimes found to be a boring domestic routine.” At such parties, the tea table was set with a pitcher of boiling water and tea-caddies filled with tea leaves. The host then placed boiling water and tea leaves in each guest’s cup and covered each cup with a saucer until the brew was ready to drink. When the tea was served to the guests, they usually drank it at a relaxed pace while conversing about the current events and issues of importance to them.¹²¹

The tea table was “a world in which white female relationships emerged from carefully scrutinized interactions, gestures, and conversations.” This was especially true at the Edenton Tea Party. By 1774, the colonies’ assertion of their rights had become the key issue, and while most women continued to act within the boundaries of their domestic role, the women in Chowan County did not. In addition to filling women’s traditional role during the Revolutionary period, they went above and beyond them in their support of the Patriot cause.¹²²

¹²⁰ Brown, 285.

¹²¹ Dillard, 8-9; quoted in Smith, 37.

¹²² Quoted in Brown, 284; Butler, 51.

On Tuesday, October 25, 1774, ten months after the Boston Tea Party, a group of women who called themselves the Edenton Ladies Patriotic Guild met on the banks of the Albemarle Sound to rid their county of its East India tea and other British goods. The date was influenced by various factors, especially the previously described politics and the weather at that time. The previous year, October weather in North Carolina was described in a pamphlet, “There cannot be a more temperate air and finer climate, than here, the weather being mild and dry for the space of forty or fifty days.” This certainly accommodated the women’s plans for their tea party.¹²³

Edenton’s similarities to Boston in its geography and its economy are also significant in the study of their tea parties. While Boston’s only connection to the mainland of the colony was the land bridge called the Boston Neck, Edenton was also largely surrounded by water, more than one body of it. Consequentially, both cities were dependant on maritime commerce, and despite Boston’s superiority, both towns’ importation and exportation of foreign and domestic goods made them two of the colonies’ important shipping centers at that time.¹²⁴

The women of Chowan County’s understanding of the importance of Edenton is another reason why they held their tea party there. Specifically, it was held at the home of Elizabeth King, the wife of Thomas King, a wealthy Edenton merchant. It is here that Historian Linda Kerber’s insight is fitting. She argues that “the place to display female consciousness” at that time was in the women’s homes.¹²⁵ It is also noteworthy that Elizabeth’s home was located to the side of the Chowan County Courthouse’s large, well-kept lawn. Besides the political significance of the house’s location, the southern border of the courthouse was the Albemarle Sound, which provided the women with an outlet for the disposal of their East India tea.

¹²³ Berkin, 21; quoted in Boyd, 437-438.

¹²⁴ Unger, 11.

¹²⁵ Kerber, 105.

While it is estimated that between seventy-two and eighty-four men participated in the Boston Tea Party, fifty-one women participated in the Edenton Tea Party. While the women are inferior in number, never before in the colonies had so many women been recorded as planning and executing a public meeting for political purposes, let alone signing their names to a public political document afterwards.

It is not known what percentage of the county's population these women were because the county's first census was taken twelve years later. Dillard points out that because the population of the town was not large, the participants were likely most of the women living close to and in the town at that time. However, the fact that there were 234 women in Chowan County twelve years later and the subsequent confiscation of Loyalist property in Edenton suggests that there were more than those fifty-one women in the county when the Edenton Tea Party took place. What is important is that the tea party participants were "the leading women in the Albemarle region." Their status was the result of their relation to the leading men in the region.¹²⁶

While their Boston counterparts dressed up as Indians, who represented freedom to some extent at that time, the Edenton women did not disguise themselves in their demonstration. They declared their support of the First Provincial Congress and passed similar resolutions. With Winifred Hoskins as the secretary, their declaration read:

As we cannot be indifferent on any occasion that appears nearly to affect the peace and happiness of our country, and as it has been thought necessary, for the public good, to enter into several particular resolves by a meeting of Members deputed from the whole Province, it is a duty which we owe, not only to our near and dear connections who have concurred in them, but to ourselves who are essentially interested in their welfare to do every thing as far as lies in our power to testify our sincere adherence to the same; and we

¹²⁶ Dillard, 5; 1786 Chowan County Census; quoted in Parramore, 31. Smith wrongly states that forty-seven women participated; Dillard points out that Wheeler wrongly states that fifty-four women participated. Fifty-one signatures accompany the resolution, as seen in English newspapers.

do therefore accordingly subscribe this paper, as a witness of our fixed intention and solemn determination to do so.

Below this declaration and their resolutions to boycott British goods, fifty-one women signed their full names to the document at a time when one out of every four colonists was literate and women were less likely to be literate than men.¹²⁷

Kerber points out that before then, signing a petition was many women's first political act. Even then, women usually wrote and signed petitions as individuals. It was rare for more than one woman to sign one, and it was even more rare for a female population to be organized to sign a petition, much less a large one. However, when the petitions of their colony were not heard, the women in Chowan County decided to publicly rebel, and they did so as an organized group, even though such female acts were unheard of at that time.¹²⁸

Several historians have recognized the Edenton Tea Party as the first instance in which women claimed a voice in the politics of the American colonies. The only one who disagrees with this statement in writing is Lindley Butler, and he does not explain his difference of opinion or, more importantly, provide evidence of an earlier instance of such action.¹²⁹

After the Edenton Tea Party was held, British and colonial men and women reacted in different ways to the women's stand. First, not all colonial women felt the way those in Edenton did about British goods, especially East India tea. While many of them kept up the pretense of supporting the Patriot cause through the boycotting of such goods, many of them did not want to

¹²⁷ Unger, 3; quoted in "Edenton, North Carolina, Oct. 25, 1774," *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 16 January 1775; "The Barker House," Edenton Historical Commission 2009. <http://www.edentonhistoricalcommission.org/history/barkerhouse.php> (accessed 5 August 2011).

¹²⁸ Kerber, 41; 98.

¹²⁹ Butler, 55.

give up products like tea, and they did not. In many cases, they were even against such boycotts. This was the case in both Patriot and Loyalist female populations.¹³⁰

Despite the passing of nonimportation and nonconsumption agreements, including the Edenton Tea Party Resolves, tea continued to be popular among the women of the colonies. However, there were consequences for paying the tea tax and consuming the tea in many of the opposing areas. In Boston, rioters burned a merchant's house down because he paid the tax on tea. Later, a man of the church comforted his neighbors with the claim that it was done for the cause.

There were consequences for women as well. Women who boycotted tea “were vigilant in seeing that others should not have what they had given up, going so far as to denounce those who dared to relapse from their resolutions.” This was likely true in Edenton as well. More male colonists, on the other hand, encouraged women like those in Edenton to continue their support of the Patriot cause than criticized them.¹³¹

When the news of the Edenton Tea Party reached the English three months later, the women's declaration and resolutions were published in major London newspapers, including the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* and the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*. While only their declaration, previously quoted, was included in the *Gazetteer*, both their declaration and their resolutions were included in the *Morning Chronicle*. The latter read:

The provincial deputies of North Carolina having resolved not to drink any more tea nor wear more British cloth, etc., many ladies of this province have determined to give a memorable proof of their patriotism, and have accordingly entered into the following honorable and spirited association. I send it to you to show your fair countrywomen how zealously and faithfully American ladies follow the laudable example of their husbands, and what opposition your matchless ministers may expect to receive from a people, thus firmly united against them.”

¹³⁰ Unger, 123-135.

¹³¹ Unger, 3, 158; quoted in Cometti, 336; Berkin, xvii.

Both newspapers published the fifty-one signatures of the women below their articles.¹³²

The Edenton Tea Party, like previous male protest in the colonies, consisted of an assembly and a boycott, both seen as illegal by their mother country. Therefore, the demonstration certainly infuriated British officials, as the Boston Tea Party had. When news of it reached them, the officials made the same mistake that they had made in their understanding of the previous tea party. They did not recognize that the demonstration was representative of a unified resistance on the part of the Patriots.

Furthermore, the Edenton Tea Party was a source of amusement for the British, unlike its Boston predecessor. Two weeks after the women's declaration and resolutions were published in the London newspapers, James Iredell's brother wrote to him from Great Britain, where he and other members of their family lived. In his letter, Arthur asked James, "The Name of Johnstone I see among others; are any of my Sister's Relations Patriotic Heroines?"¹³³ He was speaking of Hannah Iredell, who was married to James and was a sister of one of the participants.

Historian Mary Beth Norton argues that Arthur, like many of his peers, saw the first signs of female political consciousness in the colonies, namely the Edenton Tea Party, as a funny story instead of acknowledging that their view of the role that women should play in the colonies was changing. He mocks the women's power in the letter to his brother, "Is there a Female Congress at Edenton too? I hope not, for we Englishmen are afraid of the Male Congress, but if the Ladies [...] should attack us, the most fatal consequences is to be dreaded." Despite Arthur's mockery,

¹³² "Edenton Ladies' Agreement, 27 October 1774," *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 16 January 1775.

¹³³ Quoted in Higginbotham, 282-284.

he acknowledges that the British could take comfort in the likelihood that Edenton's women had more "female Artillery" than the other towns in the American colonies.¹³⁴

Two months after their words were published in the newspapers, Phillip Dawes, a London artist, mocked the Edenton Tea Party's participants by depicting them in an unflattering cartoon, which was also published in a London newspaper. In the cartoon, fifteen unattractive persons of both sexes, various ages, and various classes are gathered around a table in a living room, at which one of them is adding her signature to the Edenton Tea Party Resolves. The paper she is signing reads, "We the ladys of Edenton do hereby solemnly engage not to conform to ye pernicious Custom of Drinking Tea or that we [...] will not promote ye wear of any Manufacture from England, until such time that all Acts which tend to enslave this our Native Country shall be repealed."¹³⁵

None of the other persons in the cartoon are paying attention to the signing of the resolutions except a masculine woman sitting at the right side of the table. This woman is thought to be the Earl of Bute, a Scottish politician who was rumored to have resigned as Prime Minister after tutoring George III of England and having an affair with the younger man's mother, Princess Augusta. Perhaps Dawes included the earl as an attempt to make fun of him while insulting the Edenton ladies as well as their king's policies.¹³⁶

Other insulting images in the cartoon include the attendance of a female African American slave, a man seducing a woman, and a dog urinating as he licks a baby who is sitting beneath the table. Such images support negative stereotypes of female Patriots in the colonies.

¹³⁴ Norton, 163; quoted in Higginbotham, 282-284.

¹³⁵ "A Society of Patriotic Ladies," The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4305> (accessed 20 December 2011).

¹³⁶ "A Society of Patriotic Ladies."

They imply that women like those in Edenton, who were opposing British authority, were abandoning their proper roles.

A copy of the cartoon rendered in paint was later found by American naval officers at Gibraltar and became important to the remembrance of the event. Historian Richard Dillard saw it in Edenton forty-five years after the Edenton Tea Party, and he proceeded to write the first in-depth account of the demonstration. It is certain that the cartoon was a major influence on Dillard's work. In it, he points out, "Pictures have immortalized many events in history, and it is very probable that but for this one, the pleasing little incident would have been lost or forgotten."¹³⁷

Much like the Boston Tea Party, the Edenton Tea Party was an important event in the Revolutionary period of American women's history. Though colonial women had been boycotting British goods for years, it was the first time such a large group of American women had publicly united in opposition to male authority. That this had not been accomplished with the help of men was even more extraordinary. Whether colonial and British men admitted it or not, women's role in the colonies was changing, or the demonstration in Edenton could not have taken place.

John Adam's praise of the Boston Tea Party is applicable to its southern successor, "This destruction of the tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important consequences, and so lasting, that I cannot but consider it as an epocha in History."¹³⁸ One of the questions that was raised in the years that followed the Edenton Tea Party, the years of the American Revolution, was the question of how women were going to support the Patriot

¹³⁷ Quoted in Dillard, 11; 5.

¹³⁸ Unger, 4.

cause in war, and the women in Edenton, along with the women of the other twelve colonies, answered that question as well.

CHAPTER 4

REVOLUTION

“The love of country...

blended with those softer domestic virtues.”¹³⁹

George Washington

The Edenton Tea Party of 1774 was neither the beginning nor the end of the women in Chowan County’s struggle against British authority. In the decade that followed the demonstration, they faced more hardships with fewer resources. In spite of such challenges, “the people of this section were, in the revolution, the firm friends of independence, and the determined foes to oppression.”¹⁴⁰

Edenton’s sentiment can be found in its church records as well as its secular documentation. On June 19, 1775, members of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, located in the center of the town, met and resolved, despite their allegiance to George III, that Parliament did not have the right to tax the colonies in order to control them. They also declared their intent to oppose such actions, “All attempts by fraud or force to establish and exercise such claims and powers are violations of the peace and the security of the people, and ought to be resisted to the utmost.”¹⁴¹

The members of the church also declared their support for the Continental and Provincial Congress because they were given the opportunity to elect the persons who represented them in both of these leading political bodies. Finally, they resolved to follow the resolutions of the

¹³⁹ Kerber, 106.

¹⁴⁰ Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 117.

¹⁴¹ Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 117.

Continental and Provincial Congress “under the sanctions of virtue, honor, and the sacred love of liberty and our country.” The signers included Richard Hoskins, William Boyd, Thomas Benbury, and William Bennett, all of whom were related to women who had participated in the Edenton Tea Party the previous year.¹⁴²

There had been no royal assemblies held in North Carolina since April, and the news of the battles of Lexington and Concord had reached the colony in late May. Like many of the other colonies, North Carolina began to physically prepare for the war for independence that had begun. They started by cleaning their guns and checking their ammunition. In June, the delegates they had elected to represent them in the Continental Congress encouraged such actions. Later that month, the leaders of the Edenton militia wrote to Joseph Hewes, requesting a drum and a red flag with the phrase “Liberty or Death” inscribed on it.¹⁴³

Historian Hugh Rankin argues that the burning of Fort Johnson, which had been occupied by Governor Josiah Martin, on July 18, 1775, signified that the people of eastern North Carolina had chosen to oppose the British in the Revolution. Joseph Hewes, who supported such measures that summer, responded to the developments, “I consider myself now over head and ears in what the ministry call Rebellion.” In the months that followed, months spent preparing for battle with Great Britain, the North Carolina Committee of Safety called for the enlistment of 10,000 minutemen.¹⁴⁴

The Outer Banks of the colony had become crucial to the Patriot cause because its geography provided it with natural defenses against the British. While these islands, located along the coast, made trading in the colony more difficult, they also offered protection from a maritime threat. The same can be said about the shallow waters of the banks’ sounds.

¹⁴² Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 117.

¹⁴³ Butler, 57, 59; Rankin, 6.

¹⁴⁴ Rankin, 8-9; quoted in Butler, 59.

Furthermore, ships sailing to Edenton had to cross the Swash, a narrow waterway that was only nine feet deep at high tide. A German who visited the town observed that, “It was certain that no hostile vessels of any size could venture over the Bar and the Swash.”¹⁴⁵

Warships could not pass through the inlets because they were so narrow; only small ships could. As a result, British and Loyalists’ only option was to try to intercept incoming and outgoing ships from the outside of the inlets. Historian David Stick describes this option as “a dangerous, frustrating, and often impossible proposition.” Because the port of Edenton was known for its natural protection against warships, George Washington’s great mahogany chair was sent to the town during the Revolution.¹⁴⁶

The security of the Edenton’s port also encouraged trade in the area, and most American trading ships made use of it during the war. While British ships intercepted some of these trading ships, many other traders were successful in avoiding enemy ships. This was true for visitors as well as natives of the area. On one occasion, Lemuel Creecy, Joshua Skinner, and Thomas Harvey, all residents of Edenton, had their brigantine full of goods captured by a British cruiser. Other merchants were more successful. Thomas Barker, Charles Bondfield, and other native businessmen traveled to and from Europe safely on several occasions.¹⁴⁷

As Chowan County’s involvement in the Revolution deepened in the early months of 1776, even its political leaders prepared to fight. Continental Congress delegate Joseph Hewes recorded his preparation in February, “[Although] the storm thickens I feel myself quite composed. I have furnished myself with a good musket and Bayonet, and when I can no longer be [useful] in Council I hope I shall be willing to take the field.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Stick, 44; Higginbotham, xxxix; quoted in Parramore, 33.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Stick, 44; Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 120.

¹⁴⁷ Parramore, 33-34.

¹⁴⁸ Butler, 65.

On April 12, when the Fourth Provincial Congress met in Halifax, Samuel Johnston confirmed to James Iredell that their area supported the fight for independence. It was at the same meeting that the members of the Congress passed the Halifax Resolves. In the resolves, they empowered the colony's Continental Congress delegates, Joseph Hewes, John Penn, and William Hooper, to declare North Carolina's independence from Great Britain. They also declared that the colony had the right to create its own constitution and laws. Hewes presented the resolves to the Second Continental Congress less than two months later. Historians agree that the passing of the Halifax Resolves made North Carolina the first colony to take official action for independence.¹⁴⁹

It is thought that the passing of the Halifax Resolves encouraged the signing of the Declaration of Independence. To this end, John Parramore points out John Adam's statement that Joseph Hewes's support for independence encouraged other delegates to support the break from Britain. Regardless, the members of the Second Continental Congress agreed to the wording of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, and in the weeks that followed, it was read to the inhabitants of every town in North Carolina.¹⁵⁰

Despite their determination to fight for independence, North Carolinians did not have enough guns and ammunition to battle the British in the summer of 1776. Because of this shortage, the colony's council of safety wrote to its Continental Congress delegates to inform their leaders of these needs. They did so with haste because they expected the British to land on the coast of North Carolina in the near future.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Parramore, 32; Butler, 65; "Halifax Resolves," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4328> (accessed 18 December 2011).

¹⁵⁰ Parramore, 32; Rankin, 22.

¹⁵¹ Clark, 302.

Loyalists also presented a challenge to eastern North Carolina's Patriots. The people of Edenton had encountered hostile Loyalists as early as April of that year. Captain John Goodrich, a Loyalist sailing on the *Lilly*, captured the *Polly*, belonging to James Buchanan and Archibald Campbell of Edenton, on the fourteenth of the month. Later the same day, the *Fincastle*, another anti-Patriot ship, took this a step further by plundering the *Polly*, stealing the livestock and guns from the crew. Fortunately, Ocracoke pilots took the *Polly* back from the enemy soon after, and Edentonians applauded them for their effort.¹⁵²

The double capture of the *Polly* alarmed the people of the area, causing them to appoint a committee to improve the defense of the North Carolina coast. The members of the committee agreed on the importance of their shipping, "If the armed vessels and tenders are prevented from getting supplies of fresh provisions from the sea coast, it will be impossible for the war to be of long continuance in this province." The members also feared diseases like scurvy, which resulted from shortages of imported nutrients.¹⁵³

The committee solved this problem by stationing an independent company of soldiers, including one captain, two lieutenants, one ensign, four sergeants, four corporals, two drummers, one fifer, and eighty-six rank and file, at each North Carolina inlet. Edentonians also received the *King Tammany*, a ship fashioned by the North Carolina Council for naval warfare, that fall. It had been sent to the Occacock Bar and Jamaica, but it had not had much success with its missions. Thanks to such efforts, the outer banks of the colony seemed to be well protected by the autumn of 1776.¹⁵⁴

Unlike Boston and many other towns, Edenton was not attacked on a large scale, and it was never occupied for an extended amount of time by the British during the American

¹⁵² Stick, 45-47.

¹⁵³ Stick, 48.

¹⁵⁴ Stick, 48, 50, 53.

Revolution. However, the enemy came close on several occasions. After British troops captured Portsmouth in May of 1779, the people of Chowan County feared that they were next. Jean Blair, a widow who had participated in the Edenton Tea Party, wrote to James Iredell on the seventeenth of the month, “They say the British troops will certainly be here by Wednesday night.”¹⁵⁵

Because the town had no defense against a land attack, many Edentonians sent their belongings up the rivers. Many accompanied their belongings; some did not. In Blair’s letter to Iredell, she reported that Mrs. Barker and Mrs. Nash had left with all of their possessions, even their photographs and mirrors which had to be unscrewed from their walls. She also reported that Joseph Hewes and other leaders had left the town the previous evening.¹⁵⁶

Despite the evacuation of the town, the British did not attack Edenton, and the residents who had left returned to their homes with their possessions. In Blair’s letter to Iredell, she wrote of the altered conclusions of the town concerning British activity in the area, “It is said they are fortifying Portsmouth which I think is the [likeliest] story.” She wrote that she and the other residents who returned to the town were criticized for coming back because a British attack was still feared. Blair’s reply to such criticism was the decision not to be frightened into retreat again unless more compelling evidence of the enemy’s approach was provided.¹⁵⁷

In the autumn of 1780, British General Thomas Benbury moved his troops to a position thirty-five miles from Edenton and was prepared to fight. When news of their course reached the town, its inhabitants dumped over forty cannons into the bay to keep them from being used by the nearby British raiding parties. Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, Charles Lee, and William

¹⁵⁵ Parramore, 36-37; quoted in Higginbotham, 84.

¹⁵⁶ Higginbotham, 84.

¹⁵⁷ Parramore, 36-37; quoted in Higginbotham, 84.

Borritz had sent these cannons to Edenton in 1777 and 1778. Despite the destruction of the town's artillery, Benbury and his troops did not attack the town.¹⁵⁸

The next twelve months were the most difficult for Edentonians. In 1781, they lived in constant fear of British arrival. On January 4, Jean Blair wrote to her daughter, Helen, "They say people are getting ready to run again and the English are to be in Edenton by Saturday." The next month, Brigadier General Benedict Arnold made plans to take northeastern North Carolina, stop its shipping, and divert its attention from Lord Cornwallis and General Leslie, but he did not follow through with them.¹⁵⁹

The third threat of a violent encounter with the British came in the spring. Cornwallis was moving north through Carolina, and Edentonians were worried that he would choose their port to resupply his troops. While this would be unfortunate for the town, Patriot forces hoped that he would because they could easily surround him there. As the British approached, residents like Jane Blair moved their families to towns like Windsor in April in order to keep them and their possessions safe.¹⁶⁰

Blair described the escalation of the situation in Edenton in a letter she wrote to Hannah Iredell on May 3, "I think we have jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire." Blair reported that the British had come within thirty miles of her and that they were on their way to Halifax. She also reported that eight of their boats had been observed in Edenton Bay and that Cornwallis was on his way to Edenton to join his troops there.¹⁶¹

Unlike the two previous scares, this time "the war came to Edenton Bay." In the last week of May, troops from the *General Arnold*, a British row-galley, captured an Edenton

¹⁵⁸ Moore, 12; Parramore, 37.

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Higginbotham, 203; 225; Stick, 68.

¹⁶⁰ Parramore, 37; Higginbotham, 226-227.

¹⁶¹ Higginbotham, 234.

schooner, the *Small Hopes*, which belonged to William Littlejohn. These soldiers also captured a ship owned by Robert Smith. In response, four Chowan County boats belonging to Pollock, Borritz, Johnston, and Caswell were armed and caught up with the British. Their galley was imprisoned in Edenton, but only the Smith ship was recovered; the British had burned the *Small Hopes*. Charles Johnson later described the event to James Iredell, “I never saw nor could ever hope to see, so much public spirit, personal courage, and intrepid resolution. It would please you to see it.” He described the participation of Edenton as unanimous.¹⁶²

The war came to Chowan County again that July. This time, British troops burned warehouses and homes on the Chowan River. This frightened Edentonians more than previous encounters, and the women and children of the town retreated south. While six hundred more Tory troops came within miles of Edenton, no fighting occurred, and three months later, General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown.¹⁶³ The American colonists had won their war; they had won their independence.

Jane Blair waited until November to travel back to Edenton. Historian Edith Meyer argues that this waiting period between Cornwallis’s surrender and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in September of 1783 was a source of stress for Southern women as well as a source of relief because the American Army had not been disbanded. As far as the outer banks of North Carolina were concerned, David Stick argues “to all appearances the war [...] was over” by mid April of 1782.¹⁶⁴

During the war, a great number of men had left their homes to fight for the independence and protection for their colonies and their families. “Public Spirit of the Women,” a well-known

¹⁶² Parramore, 37. Edentonians later learned that one of the prisoners was a turncoat named Michael Quinn. While being transported from the Edenton jail to Halifax, he was killed by a guard, and this was a source of controversy for the next several years.

¹⁶³ Parramore, 38.

¹⁶⁴ Lemmon, 20-21; Meyer, 220; quoted in Stick, 71.

poem from a Patriot's diary, reads, "God bless our gentle mothers, dear, who cheer us on our way! God bless our loving sisters, dear, who with them at home stay. We'll fight for them, and die for them, to keep them from Tory!"¹⁶⁵

Meanwhile, many women's homes became their battlefield during one of the longest wars in American history. Furthermore, women like Jean Blair and many others who participated in the Edenton Tea Party, whose husbands and sons were absent or dead, were faced with running their households with little to no male assistance while British and Loyalist forces threatened their resources and their lives.

The life stories of four of the Edenton Tea Party women, beginning with Penelope Barker, represent such struggles. The president of the Tea Party spent her entire life in Chowan County, and during it, she overcame many hardships. She was the daughter of Dr. Samuel Padgett and Elizabeth Blount, who was the daughter of James Blount, a wealthy politician. Like Penelope, her sister Elizabeth married an attorney, and her sister Sarah married a doctor. Unfortunately, when her father and her sister Elizabeth died, she had to assume the care of her sister's three children.¹⁶⁶

In 1745, she married John Hodgson and assumed the care of his two sons and two plantations. When he died two years later, she inherited his estate and was left with five children to care for. In 1751, she married James Craven, a wealthy planter and politician. When he died four years later, they had not had any children together, but she inherited his estate. In 1757, she married Thomas Barker. In the years that followed, they had three children together, but none of

¹⁶⁵ Frank Moore, *Songs and Ballads of the American Revolution: With Notes and Illustrations* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1855), 208.

¹⁶⁶ William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography: Volume I* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 95.

them survived their first year: Penelope lived two months, Thomas lived eight months, and Nathaniel lived nine months.¹⁶⁷

In 1761, the elder Thomas left for London, where he was assigned to carry out his duties as a colonial agent for North Carolina for the next decade. During the blockade that accompanied the American Revolution, he was not able to return to Edenton until 1778. As a result, Penelope was forced to provide for, manage, and defend their household in his absence. She is even rumored to have stopped a British officer from taking her carriage horses from her stables by cutting the reins with her husband's sword and driving them back into the barn, impressing the officer to let her keep her horses and to not bother her again.¹⁶⁸

During this time, another tragedy occurred: her son, Thomas Hodgson died, leaving her with even more to oversee on her property. Despite the heavy burden placed upon her, she still led the Edenton Tea Party in 1774 and the subsequent boycott of British goods in Chowan County until Thomas was able to return to Edenton. Following his homecoming, he lived in the town for eleven years before he died. Penelope joined him in the Hayes Cemetery nine years later.¹⁶⁹

Mary Blount, also known as Polly, was another one of the leading women in Edenton who participated in the Tea Party. She was the daughter of John and Sarah Vail Blount and the sister of James, Wilson, and Elizabeth Blount. The Blounts, mainly those in the Albemarle region, had been a prominent family in North Carolina aristocracy since the early eighteenth century, and its members "held political office, both high and low, owned huge tracts of land, shipped to the West Indies and Europe, and were in general among the financial and social

¹⁶⁷ Powell, 95-96.

¹⁶⁸ Powell, 96; Dillard, 12.

¹⁶⁹ Powell, 96.

leaders of the day.”¹⁷⁰ The Blounts were also ardent Patriots. While Mary, Elizabeth, and their brother James’s wife Ann participated in the Edenton Tea Party, James was a colonel in the militia.

Mary was the first wife of Charles Pettigrew, who was the pastor of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in the Revolutionary period. He was “an excellent example of upward social mobility in early America” because he advanced from pastor to prosperous planter in the years that followed. He strove to treat his slaves and his congregation well as well as run his plantations successfully, and he eventually owned three plantations with thirty-five slaves in the Albemarle region: Bonarva, Belgrade, and Scotch Hall.¹⁷¹

However, Mary and Charles’s marriage was based on more than financial gain. It was a love match. A poem that the reverend wrote for his wife read, “As every youthful, with melting glow, tho’ cold and snow, nor can they rest, while Love’s warm guest!” The couple had three children during the war, and while the two boys survived, the girl died after eight months. In 1786, Mary died ten days after giving birth to twins, leaving behind a family that was also significant in the next century.¹⁷²

Penelope Dawson was another one of the leading women in Edenton who participated in the Tea Party. She was the daughter of Gabriel and Penelope Johnston, who was the step-daughter of Charles Eden, and the first cousin of Samuel Johnston, and she married John Dawson, the son of the president of William and Mary College, in 1758. Despite the fact that the Dawsons, especially those in the Albemarle region, had been a prominent family in North

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Lemmon, 32; Higginbotham, xxxix.

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Lemmon, v; 3; Watson, 38-39.

¹⁷² Quoted in Lemmon, 33; 36-37, 3. Mary Blount left chairs, leather, and hogs to Winifred Hoskins, who also participated in the Edenton Tea Party. This represents lasting ties among the women, related and unrelated.

Carolina aristocracy since the early eighteenth century, Penelope and John eloped because her guardian was not in favor of the marriage.¹⁷³

Their home, Eden Hall, was known as one of the most hospitable meeting places in the Albemarle region. This corresponds with James Iredell's description of Penelope, "In point of understanding, Goodness of heart, and a most polite, attractive behavior, she is generally allowed to be above all kind of competition." Her kindness was extended to her slaves as well, against the standards of southern society. For example, it was recorded that she once purchased a slave just so he could remain with his wife and children. Ironically, it was not long before her husband died, leaving her and their three children, two girls and a boy, to care for themselves.¹⁷⁴

Jean Blair's story is much like Penelope Dawson's. The sister of Samuel Johnston, she married George Blair, a prominent merchant who had moved to Edenton from Scotland like her brother. He, Joseph Hewes, and Charles Blount owned and operated the Hewes, Blount & Blair firm, which traded with New England, the West Indies, and Europe. Unfortunately, he died of an illness in the same year that John Dawson passed, leaving Jean and their five children, Samuel, William, George, Helen, and Margaret, behind. James Iredell described her as "a most valuable and respected woman."¹⁷⁵ Her letters to him, written during the Revolutionary period, reveal the thoughts of a woman who faced what many others of her sex faced during that decade, the challenge to survive without their men and many times, without their slaves.

Three years into the war, Blair wrote to James Iredell of her belief that the Revolution would last longer than her peers predicted. Her words reveal her lack of hope for the war's end, "God grant it, I say, but I am afraid better times are at too great a distance for me to ever hope to

¹⁷³ Mathews, 22, 54, 59; Higginbotham, xxxix.

¹⁷⁴ Mathews, 62, 65, 54; quoted in Higginbotham, 107.

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in Higginbotham, 107; Marguerite Butler McCall, ed., *Business as Usual: Edenton Merchant Ledgers, 1759-1819* (Edenton: The County of Chowan, 1988), xxxiii-xxxiv.

see them.” Despite such doubts, she repeatedly returned to Edenton where she continued to care for her children, her household, and her land. That same year, philosopher Edmund Burke praised the persistence of the Americans. Three years of war had not deterred them from their great goal.¹⁷⁶

Blair was not only persistent. She was determined to “put the best face on it.” Part of the reason she was able to do so was the support that she gave and received from her female relatives and friends, many of whom had participated in the Edenton Tea Party with her. At the end of several of her letters, whether they were written to political leaders or other Edenton women, she requested that her love be given to all of her ladies. Historian Kathleen Brown argues that this was common for women with absent husbands at this time, especially during crises.¹⁷⁷

One reason for women’s crucial support of each other within their families and their communities during the war was the biological and social struggles they shared. In the eighteenth century, married women were normally faced with multiple pregnancies that were accompanied by high rates of childbirth complications and infant mortality. It was also common for husbands to die and make their wives widows, which was often followed by rushed remarriages. All of these struggles fostered the large families of the century. These shared struggles were a source of happiness as well as sadness, even during the war.¹⁷⁸

Colonial women’s duties extended beyond marriage and childbirth. While the men worked in the fields and the towns, they expected their women to clean the house, cook the family’s meals, wash their clothes, milk the cows, and work in the garden. In a letter to James Iredell, Jean Blair set deadlines for such tasks at her brother’s plantation, “I came from Hayes this morning and shall return there again this evening and stay till we get the House [cleaned]

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Higginbotham, 12; Moore, 208.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in Higginbotham, 12; 13-325; Brown, 303.

¹⁷⁸ Smith, 44.

and [clothes] washed.”¹⁷⁹ This suggests that she was living there at the time or doing housework with or for her sister-in-law, Frances Johnston. Women were also the primary caretakers of their children.

While women of slave-owning families were required to do less work than women of families who did not own slaves, the Revolution stripped these families of many of their men and their help, enslaved or indentured, from their residences to fight on both sides. This left many white women to oversee their business and their remaining servants while fulfilling the duties of the absent men.¹⁸⁰

When Richard Hoskins, husband of Winifred Hoskins who participated in the Edenton Tea Party, was away fighting for the independence of the colonies, his wife managed their farm and their sixteen children, like many other women in the county. It was recorded that Richard served bravely while Winifred earned profit for their family. Historian Linda Kerber points out that men took it for granted that their women would fill in for them while the former were away at war.¹⁸¹

Women who became widows before and during the war were faced with the same duties, only their husbands would not return. In his writing titled “The Death of George Blair,” James Iredell describes the sense of loss that the widows of Edenton felt as well as the support that their female relatives provided after Jean Blair’s and Penelope Dawson’s husbands died in 1772, “How amiable, but how unhappy, a sight was it for me to see the dear Miss Johnstons —

¹⁷⁹ Mathews, 60; quoted in Higginbotham, 84.

¹⁸⁰ Mathews, 60; Cometti, 345-346.

¹⁸¹ Dillard, 13; Kerber, 48.

bursting forth from their affectionate Hearts [...] the tender effusions of grief for themselves, their sister, and their young Relations. Admirable Girls!”¹⁸²

Widows had to manage their deceased husband’s business until they were able to find someone to replace him, and some did not seek a substitute. After George Blair died and left his family in financial debt, Jean had to sell their slaves, livestock, and household goods to pay his creditors in addition to managing his shop. Despite such disadvantages, she was able to keep her land in Edenton and provide for their children.¹⁸³

Though the women’s remaining slaves were helpful in such situations, it was more difficult for widows and wives with absent husbands to manage the help than it was for male heads of households. This was especially true during the Revolution because more men were absent than normal. After Penelope Dawson’s husband died, she ran their properties with the help of Samuel Johnston. It did not take her long to realize that servants, especially overseers, did not respect the authority of women as much as men’s, so Johnston paid her visits, advised her, and made sure that her workers respected her commands.¹⁸⁴

Mothers also had to teach their daughters what they were expected to know at home, and parents often sent their sons to other towns for schooling. Jean Blair sent her sons Sammy and George to Mrs. Gillatty’s school, which was located outside of Edenton. She also sent her son Billy to work in Mr. Johnston’s store because she “thought it better to put him there than to let him be Idle about the Streets for the two months he was to be at home.” After Billy’s instructor left the school in Bertie County that he attended, his mother saw to it that he read and wrote at

¹⁸² Higginbotham, 99. The *North Carolina Gazette* reported in late 1777 that women who lost their husbands in the Revolution should be comforted by their husbands’ service of the cause for which they fought.

¹⁸³ Smith, 45; Mathews, 61.

¹⁸⁴ Mathews, 60.

home every day. She wrote that the absence of her sons, especially George, was a source of pain for her during the war, so Billy's return surely improved her spirits.¹⁸⁵

When male children were not attending school, they were usually helping their father in the fields or other areas of family business while their sisters helped their mother work in the house, the barn, and the gardens. Mothers also enlisted the help of their daughters in the care of younger siblings, which in turn prepared the daughters to raise their own children. During the Revolution, young women also sewed clothing while old women cooked food for local soldiers, and if they supported independence, the women often testified against local Tories.¹⁸⁶

Such service was impressive considering the economic struggle that accompanied the war. Molly Gutridge described women's struggle to pay the high prices for products they needed in a poem, "It's hard and cruel times to live, takes thirty dollars to buy a sieve, to buy sieves and other things too, to go [through] the world how can we do?" Jean Blair concurs in a letter to James Iredell, writing that she does not think that any of the people of Edenton could survive six more months if the prices continued to rise. Fortunately for the town, she was wrong. The war raged on for more than four more years, and many of Edenton's inhabitants survived.¹⁸⁷

Surviving the war required sacrifice from women as well as men. The Edenton Tea Party women were not the only women in North Carolina who produced the things they needed from their resources instead of buying those imported from foreign countries like Great Britain. They sewed their own dresses and shoes, neither of which was as attractive or comfortable as professionally made clothing. The ladies of Rowan County and Mecklenburg County even rejected suitors who were not willing to fight for the independence of the colonies, and this

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in Higginbotham, 12-13; Mathews, 54.

¹⁸⁶ Smith, 27; Cometti, 27; Kerber, 54.

¹⁸⁷ Quoted in Cometti, 335; Higginbotham, 12.

decision was later published in the *South Carolina Gazette* and the *Georgia Gazette*. Certainly, the Edenton women supported such sacrifices.¹⁸⁸

The lack of some products was more life threatening than the lack of others. There had been a shortage of salt in North Carolina since the beginning of the war, but it had become dangerous to the inhabitants' health by late 1775. It was at that time that Benjamin Franklin suggested pamphlets on producing salt with heat from the sun and fires. Samuel Ashe described the response as unanimous on the coast in late 1776, "The Humour of Salt boiling seems to be taking place here [...] Every Old Wife is now scouring her pint pot for the necessary operation. God send them good luck." Because of the pamphlets, coastal women were able to produce salt for their colony, which saved many lives and farms.¹⁸⁹

The greatest hindrance of women's role in the Revolution, besides the British, was disease, especially smallpox and malaria. As historian Sarah Lemmon states, "Smallpox broke out in 1773, and malaria was a constant companion." The symptoms of the former, fever, increased heart rate, headache, vomiting, and groin and back pain, were debilitating. Smallpox affected so many lives in Edenton that the leading men of the town held a meeting in January of 1773 to decide on a place to send their sick. When the news reached James Iredell the next month, he wrote to his fiancé, Hannah Johnston, in Edenton anxiously inquiring about the disease and its spread.¹⁹⁰

As harmful as smallpox was, malaria was worse, and it was "omnipresent" in colonial North Carolina. Also called the ague, its symptoms were fever, headache, fatigue, cramps, and

¹⁸⁸ Rankin, 73; Meyer, 132. Besides announcements, advertisements, and poems about them, I seldom found information about women in the few eastern North Carolina newspapers before and during the war, and as historian Robert DeMond points out, newspapers were not published in North Carolina in the latter period of the war because of the disorder.

¹⁸⁹ Clark, *Volume 10*, 840; quoted in Cometti, 335.

¹⁹⁰ Lemmon, 9; quoted in John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1972), 17; Higginbotham, 132, 214-215.

nausea, and it was often fatal. Malaria devastated several homes in Edenton, especially the Blair family. Jean Blair described their situation in October of 1780, when the British were near the town, “George too has kept his bed this four days with a fever. [...] Billy, Sammy, and Peggy and myself have missed our fever but four or five days. [...] We have hardly a Negroe well enough to dress us a little of any thing to eat.” In a letter to James Iredell, she wrote that she did not know what her family would do if the British came to Edenton because they were not healthy enough to leave the town.¹⁹¹

A little over a year later, the disease struck the family again. In a letter to Hannah Iredell, Jean wrote that her daughter Helen came down with the ague the night before and that she had to call for the doctor to bring medicine to relieve her daughter’s pain. She, too, had a fever, and she wrote that her daughter’s pain was also a source of pain for her, “I believe I suffer more than she does while she has it.” Hannah Iredell also came down with malaria, and Blair wrote to her that she was sorry that her friend was afflicted. Fortunately, all of these women recovered from their bouts with the disease.¹⁹²

By the time the American Revolution ended, Edenton’s economy was in ruins, but the British had left the town intact. The enemy had not occupied it for an extended amount of time, but the war had greatly decreased its maritime trade. Despite such setbacks, the town celebrated its victory. “Resolutions of the Citizens of Edenton,” written on August 1, 1783, read, “The blessing of God has irrevocably established that Freedom and Independence to which we have been so long aspiring.”¹⁹³

The only physical evidence of the war in the outer banks of North Carolina was the carcasses of the animals that the British had killed and the remainders of the ships that had been

¹⁹¹ Duffy, 204, 210-214, 239; quoted in Higginbotham, 184.

¹⁹² Quoted in Higginbotham 314; 203; Lemmon, 9.

¹⁹³ Parramore, 38; quoted in Higginbotham, 430.

wrecked or destroyed, but the coastal inhabitants' role in the war cannot be forgotten. Not only had at least 6,000 men from North Carolina served in the Continental Army and about 10,000 men from the colony served in militias, but about 22,000 total men from the colony had served in the Revolution. Their women, especially those in Edenton and the other outer banks, had supported their men and distinguished themselves as Patriots as well.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ Stick, 71; Rankin, 28.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“Women are not only justified but exhibit the most exalted virtue when they do depart from the domestic circle, and enter on the concerns of their country, of humanity, and of their God.”¹⁹⁵

John Quincy Adams

Adams goes on to limit his statement by adding “when it is done from purity of motive, by appropriate means.” While one cannot be sure that the motives behind the Edenton Tea Party were pure or whether the means by which it was carried out was appropriate at that time, the demonstration was certainly a significant step in American women’s history. As historian Linda Kerber points out, the failure of the women of the Revolutionary period to earn the right to participate in politics should not distract us from their endeavor to express a political philosophy that merged their domestic and public spheres.¹⁹⁶

During the war, many women had participated more in the public sphere than ever before, from testifying against the enemy in court to signing petitions against the British and publicly boycotting the enemy’s goods, but the idea of Republican Motherhood that dominated the post-war period in the United States made no room for women in politics. This idea focused on women as mothers of future generations of American republicans, and as such, they were confined to their domestic spheres.

¹⁹⁵ Kerber, 112.

¹⁹⁶ Quoted in Kerber 112; 36.

Republican mothers were expected to be virtuous, and they were expected to teach their children to be virtuous. A poem published in 1800 in Edenton's *Encyclopedian Instructor* reflects such expectations, "Be then [advised] ye young and fair, and let [sublimar] charms engage your care, with every grace of mind attempt to [shine], in virtue, [sense], in goodness [sweetly] join."¹⁹⁷

Despite such ideology, historians agree that Republican Motherhood did not erase the memories of women's participation in the public sphere during the Revolutionary period, nor did it erase their memories of the rebellion of so many of the men. Betsy Erkkila argues, "What the American Revolution gave to women finally was not real legal or political rights, but the knowledge, the language, the desire, and the power to foment further rebellion," as Abigail Adams had predicted in March of 1776.¹⁹⁸

Between 1770 and 1850, American education improved, and more men and women learned to read and write in the new nation. Kerber argues that this improvement closed the gap between men and women and affected the latter more than any other social change in this period.¹⁹⁹ Women like those who participated in the Edenton Tea Party were no longer anomalies. As women increased their knowledge of the world around them, their desire and ability to participate in it increased. More women knew how to write their names, and more of them were willing to publicly oppose men.

Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) resonated with women in the young nation. In it, Mary Wollstonecraft outlined women's ability to think for themselves, and she criticized her sex for allowing men to treat them like children. Fifty-six years later, American women met at Seneca Falls in what historian Carol Berkin calls "the second war for independence," the war for

¹⁹⁷ "On Beauty," *The Encyclopedian Instructor*, Number 2, Volume 1, 21 May 1800.

¹⁹⁸ Quoted in Erkkila, 219; 192.

¹⁹⁹ Kerber, 193.

women's independence.²⁰⁰ It was there that these women wrote the Declaration of Sentiments, which was much like the Declaration of Independence that had started the American Revolution. Seventy-one years later, Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment that gave women the right to vote. Although the Revolutionary generation of women did not live to see such milestones in women's fight for their rights as Americans, they had their own achievements. One of the first of these was the Edenton Tea Party.

The Edenton Tea Party Resolves and Jean Blair's letters give us a glimpse into the internal and external struggles of Patriot women in the Revolution. Faced with various hardships, these women had the choice to lay low as they ran their households or support their men by opposing the British. Though some were not willing to sacrifice British goods for the Patriot cause, especially when it came to luxurious goods like tea, women like those in Edenton were willing to do so publicly. As a result, many women had to produce or help produce much of what they needed from their area's resources, and they sent much of their products to their troops. Kerber points out that such consumption behaviors have been a part of American politics in crises since the Revolution.²⁰¹

The town of Edenton is proud of the legacy of their Patriots. As Dr. Thomas Parramore states, "The visitor to Edenton will find on every street of the old town the living memorials to those crucial years when the sons of Chowan helped shape the destinies of the nation." Though he does not include the daughters of Chowan in this statement, it is evident that the town is also proud of its Tea Party's women. While the host, Elizabeth King's house was torn down in 1876, there is a Revolutionary cannon and bronze colonial teapot at the site of the Edenton Tea Party that reads, "On this spot stood the residence of Mrs. Elizabeth King, in which the Ladies of

²⁰⁰ Berkin, 161.

²⁰¹ Kerber, 44.

Edenton met October 25, 1774, to protest against the tax on tea.”²⁰² The text on North Carolina Highway Historical Marker A22 is similar, “EDENTON TEA PARTY, FIFTY-ONE WOMEN MET MRS. ELIZABETH KING’S HOME, WHICH STOOD 1100 FT. S.E., AND RESOLVED, OCT. 25, 1774, TO SUPPORT THE AMERICAN CAUSE.”

Just north of the site of the Edenton Tea Party, the Chowan County Courthouse still stands. The Cupola House and the Barker House have also been maintained, and they have been furnished like the houses of the Revolutionary period and opened to the public as museums. Inside both houses, the caption on the portraits of Penelope Barker reads, “President of the Edenton Tea-Party of 1774.” The Chowan County Courthouse and the Cupola House have been named National Historic Landmarks. Edenton Tea Party artifacts can also be seen in the North Carolina Museum of History.²⁰³

Also, the Iredell House, the Charlton House, the Littlejohn House, and the Leigh-Hathaway House, previously owned by Lydia Bennett who signed the Edenton Tea Party Resolves, still stand, not far from St Paul’s Episcopal Church, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the old rector’s study. While the church was not maintained for more than twenty years after the Revolution, it was repaired in 1806. Also listed on the National Register of Historic Places is the Mulberry Hill plantation, which is located outside of Edenton, near the Hayes Plantation, previously owned by Samuel Johnston.²⁰⁴

It is in this context that Nellie Roberson’s argument is applicable. In “The Organized Work of Women in One State,” she focuses on the woman’s club movement in North Carolina and argues that the movement was “the one powerful agency through which a woman has been able to express her individuality.” The starting point of her article and her argument is the

²⁰² Quoted in Parramore, 4; quoted in Dillard, 16; 7.

²⁰³ Moore, 9, 19; Dillard, 2.

²⁰⁴ Moore, 42; 75.

Edenton Tea Party. Since 1774, the women's club movement in North Carolina has increased from 51 to 75,000.²⁰⁵

One of the most well-known women's clubs, The National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution chapter in Edenton is named the Edenton Tea Party Chapter. This group of women saved the Iredell House in 1948, and it is currently a plantation school. Another important group of women in the town is the Edenton Woman's Club. In addition to publishing Elizabeth Vann Moore's *Guide Book to Historic Edenton and Chowan County*, this club, along with the Business and Professional Women's Club and the Junior Chamber of Commerce, had the Barker House moved, restored, and opened to the public in 1952. Such groups promise to continue to complete such projects.²⁰⁶

In addition to restoring and opening historical sites, Edenton has an annual rally in memory of the Edenton Tea Party that includes patriotic music, speakers, and reenactment of the Edenton Tea Party. At this rally, the town recites the Pledge of Allegiance and sings the National Anthem.²⁰⁷

Richard Dillard wrote, "In looking back upon our past it should be a matter of pride to know, that such women helped to form the preface of our history, characters which should be held up to our children as worthy of emulation." As for the women's children, several of them and their relatives served the United States as their parents had. Penelope Barker's daughter Betsy married a wealthy Virginian colonel. Jean Blair's son George was a member of legislature in 1829. Abigail Charlton's son Jasper married the sister of a governor. Hannah Iredell's son

²⁰⁵ Nellie Roberson, "The Organized Work of Women in One State," *The Journal of Social Forces* 1, no. 1 (November 1922), 50-51.

²⁰⁶ Moore, 10, 47; Parramore, 92.

²⁰⁷ "November is Coming!" <http://edentonteparty.com/event.html>.

James was a governor of North Carolina and a Senator in 1828. Elizabeth Creecy Benbury's son John died of wounds he received at the Battle of Malvern Hill.²⁰⁸

Some of the women's descendants even contributed to remembrance of the Edenton Tea Party. Vivian Coxe, a great-great-great-great granddaughter of Elizabeth Green, wrote *Eliza and the Edenton Tea Party*, a children's book about the demonstration, and dedicated it to her predecessor. Most importantly, Lieutenant William Muse, Miss Blount's son, was the naval officer who brought the portrait of the Tea Party to the town in 1830.²⁰⁹

The Edenton Tea Resolves are a matter of pride for many, whether they are the signers' descendants, North Carolinians, or American women. Like Richard Dillard, I hope that I am not the last to research and write about these women who publicly opposed their colony's motherland through boycotts at a time when women were not allowed to oppose men even on the local level. Their story is crucial to the story of women in the Revolution as well as women's gradual entrance into American politics.

²⁰⁸ Quoted in Dillard, 6; Spence, 54; Wheeler, *Memoirs*, 120; Powell, 97; Moore, 34.

²⁰⁹ Vivian Barbee Coxe, *Eliza and the Edenton Tea Party* (Raleigh: Martini Print Media, Inc., 1997), 4.

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