

Henry Laurens, Victim of the Mob October 23, 1765



Henry Laurens was a prominent merchant in Charles Town. The following letter is the second of two versions and was addressed to his friend, Governor James Grant of East Florida. For some reason, his later version is dated two days earlier than the first version.

The Henry Laurens House, at 320 East Bay Street in Charleston, was demolished in 1914. Image courtesy of The Charleston Museum, Charleston, South Carolina.

. . . 26 th October 1765.

. . . At Midnight of the said Wednesday (Wednesday night, 23rd of October), I heard a most violent thumping & confused Noise at my Western door & Chamber Window & soon distinguish'd the sounds of "Liberty, Liberty & Stamp'd Paper, open your doors & let us search your House & Cellars." I opened the Window, saw a croud **[crowd]** of Men chiefly in disguise & heard the Voices & thumpings of many more on the other side, assured them that I had no Stamp'd Paper nor any connexion with stamps.

When I found that no fair words would pacify them I accused them with cruelty to a poor Sick Woman far gone with Child & produced Mrs. Laurens shrieking & wringing her hands adding that if there was any one Man amongst them who owed me a spite & took this base method to avenge himself, & would turn out, I had a brace of Pistols at his service & would settle the dispute immediately but that it was base in such a multitude to attack a single Man. **[Laurens is saying that if someone had some personal reason to attack him and was using the mob to do so, Laurens had some pistols which they could settle the matter with man to man in a duel].**

To this they replied in general that they Loved & respected me, would not hurt me nor my property but that they were sent even by some of my seemingly best friends to search for Stamp'd Paper which they were certain was in my custody, and advised me to open the door to prevent worse consequences.

Conscious of my innocence, I was pausing whether to refuse every one of their demands or barely to open the door, at which they still continued knocking as if they would have beat down the house and let them proceed as their rage & madness should impel them, but Mrs. Laurens's condition, having fallen into strong hysterics, prompted me to open the door which in two minutes more they would have beat through. A brace of Cutlasses across my breast was the salutation & "Lights, Lights, & search," was the

Cry. I presently knew several of them under their thickest disguise of Soot, Sailors habits, Crape Masks, slouch hats, etc. & to their great surprize called no less than nine of them by name & fixed my eye so attentively upon other faces as to discover at least the same number since.

They made a very superficial search indeed or rather no search at all in my House, Counting House, Cellar, & Stable & I am convinced they were not sent to Search. After that farce was over they insisted upon my taking what they called "A Bible Oath" that I knew not where the Stamp'd Paper was which I absolutely refused, not failing to confirm my denials with Damns of equal weight with their own, a language which I only had learn'd from them.

They threatned then to carry me away to some unknown place & punish me. I replied they might if they would, they had strength enough but I would be glad to have it attempted by any Man alone either among them or of those who they said had sent them.

When they found this attempt fruitless a softer Oath, as they thought, was propounded. I must say "May God disinherit me from the Kingdom of Heaven" if I knew were [where] the Stamped Papers were. This I likewise peremptorily refused & added that I would not have one word extorted from my Mouth, that I had voluntarily given my word & honour but would not suffer even that to pass my Lips by compulsion. Further that If I had once accepted of a trust they might Stamp me to Powder but should not make me betray it, that my sentiments of the Stamp Act were well known. I had openly declared myself an Enemy to it & would give & do a great deal to procure its annihilation but that I could not think they pursued a right method to obtain a repeal, etc.; that they had assumed a wrong Motto, instead of "Liberty," they should write "Licentiousness" on their Banner, for they were now trampling Liberty underfoot. Some times they applauded, some times cursed me at length . . .

[They criticized Laurens for his friendship with Governor Grant of Florida who had made enemies in the city in a previous incident that need not concern us here. Laurens responds]

"But in one word for all Gentlemen, I am in your power, you are very strong & may if you please Barbicue me. I can but die. But you nor all the Mobs in Carolina shall not by any force or means whatsoever compel me to renounce friendships or to speak ill of Men that I think well of or to say or do a mean thing." This was their last effort they praised me highly & insisted upon giving me three Cheers & then retired with "God bless your honour," good night Colonel, we hope the poor lady will do well, etc. A Thousand other

things you may believe were said & done in an hour & a quarter the time of their visit, but the above is a fair abstract of all that is important. Is it not amazing that such a number of Men many of them heated with Liquor & all armed with Cutlasses & Clubbs did not do one penny damage to my Garden not even to walk over a Bed & not 15/ damage to my Fence, Gates, or House? Mrs. Laurens has been very ill indeed but I begin to have great hopes that she will go out her expected time of four or five Weeks longer. [James was born on November 26 and died nearly ten years later in England] The party have gain'd a great Victory & triumph to day over G. Saxby & Caleb Lloyd. You'll hear a Million of reports. Don't believe all or rather believe none but what are authenticated. I pray God preserve you from insurrections & from every Evil, & remain, etc.

The Mob consisted of about 60 or 80 nearly an equal number of Honest hearted Jacks & Towns Men the former not knowing me & dreading no body were zealous to execute the business upon which they were sent or pretently sent

Glossary: (in order of appearance)

Pacify – calm down

Hysterics – crying uncontrollably

Salutation - greeting

Propounded – proposed or offered

Peremptorily – putting an immediate end to a suggestion

Extorted – forced by threats

This letter has been revised with quotation marks, and occasionally long sentences or run-on sentences have been divided and punctuated accordingly. I have also divided the text into separate segments to make it easier to read rather than how it was originally paragraphed. You may see a transcript of the original version in ALS, Ballindalloch Castle Muniments as referenced in Rogers, Jr., George C., ed. The Papers of Henry Laurens: September 1, 1765 – July 31, 1768. Vol. 5. Columbia, SC: South Carolina Historical Society and University of South Carolina Press, 1976. pp. 37-40. Available at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

All definitions are either quoted or based upon Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, MA: Merriam- Webster, 1986.

Discussion Questions:

1.	How did the mob behave?	
2.	What impact is this conduct going to have on the opinion of wealthy colonists like Henry Laurens?	
3.	How does this episode demonstrate the practical challenges of enforcing resistance to British legislation (such as the boycott of the Stamp Paper) among fellow colonists?	