The 'French-Bread Riot' of 8 September 1778: The French Fleet and Boston's Food Supply

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Introduction

On the evening of 8 September 1778, a group of French bakers toiled along the waterfront in Boston baking bread for the French fleet anchored offshore. The French had arrived a little over a week before, battered by a hurricane and desperately short of supplies after the failed attempt to capture Newport, Rhode Island. Upon arriving at Boston, one of the first things Jean-Charles, chevalier de Borda, Major of the French Squadron, did was to establish bakeries on shore to supply biscuit, a hard-baked bread, for the fleet.¹ On that particular evening, a boisterous crowd approached the bakers and demanded bread. Adhering to their orders from Major Borda, the bakers refused to hand over any of the biscuit. The crowd, “being refused…fell upon the bakers with clubs, and beat them in a most outrageous manner.”² Two French officers, Lieutenant Grégoire Le Henault de Saint-Sauveur and Lieutenant Georges-René Pléville Le Pelley, were nearby and rushed to investigate the disturbance. Coming upon the scene, they attempted to restore order and the crowd proceeded to assault them as well. Both were seriously wounded, Saint-Sauveur so seriously that he died from his wounds a week later. Major General William Heath, commander of the Eastern Military District headquartered in Boston, quickly became aware of the situation and dispatched the city guard to suppress the rioters. However, by the time the guard arrived the rioters had already dispersed.

As the sun rose on the morning of 9 September, the situation appeared very serious indeed. Not only had two officers of the French fleet been wounded, one of them mortally, but one of the officers was no mere lieutenant. Saint-Sauveur was also the chamberlain to the French King’s brother, and he was the brother-in-law of the Comte de Breugon, one of the flag officers
in d’Estaing’s command. He died from his injuries a week later. In an age when personal honor played a major role in the lives of military officers, Saint-Sauveur’s death could have easily spiraled into a major diplomatic incident. Piled atop the abuse the French had received from General John Sullivan and others following the French withdrawal from the failed Newport expedition, this incident had the very real potential to end the young alliance between France and the United States. Luckily, cooler heads prevailed in all quarters and both the American and French officials did their best to put the incident behind them. It was quickly agreed by all that British sailors or Tory loyalists must somehow be responsible for the incident and any lingering anger was thus directed against their mutual enemy. By the time the French fleet departed Boston in early November the riot had been all but forgotten.

And so the story remained for the next hundred years, until revived interest in the Revolution on the other side of the Atlantic brought it to light. In the course of compiling a catalogue of those French soldiers and sailors who had fought during the war for American Independence, one Colonel Chaillé Long, a founder of the French Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, came across a reference to the riot in a ship’s log book. Intrigued, he wrote to Captain A. A. Folsom, an antiquarian in Boston, asking for details about Lieutenant Saint-Sauveur’s burial place. The log recorded that the government of Massachusetts Bay had promised to build a memorial in honor of Saint-Sauveur. Captain Folsom replied that no such monument existed, but did bring the matter to the attention of the Massachusetts state government, which voted in 1905 to finally build the monument to Saint-Sauveur. Completed in 1917, the memorial stands in the yard of King’s Chapel in Boston, where the Saint-Sauveur was supposedly buried.
Much of the current literature on this topic is based on writing from this early-twentieth century rediscovery. Two major pieces, *The French at Boston During the Revolution* by Fitz-Henry Smith Jr. and *Economic Conditions in Massachusetts during the American Revolution* by Ralph Harlow, provided the basis for more recent writers who have tackled the riot. Harlow does not mention the riot at all, but those who argue that a shortage of bread was not responsible for the riot have used his appraisal of the food situation in Boston during 1778 as evidence. Smith devotes a fair amount of attention to the riot, but offers little analysis and focuses on reprinting documents related to the affair and its aftermath. To his credit, Smith appears somewhat skeptical of the attempts to blame British deserters or privateers for the riot, a view shared by most of the subsequent authors who have treated the topic. However, few have chosen to outright question it and those who do generally fail to provide a convincing alternative explanation.

This paper proposes to do just that. It will reexamine the official explanation to see whether British deserters, privateers, or Loyalist provocateurs were indeed to blame for the riot. If the British were not to blame, as this paper will suggest, then it follows the townspeople of Boston must have been responsible. I use townspeople broadly to include those people, not of strictly British origin, who were living and working in Boston during the time of the riot. Given Boston’s nature as a port, it is possible that some of those involved could have been foreign-born, but for the purposes of this examination the important distinction lies between British and non-British. A second question then follows immediately from the first; that is, if townspeople were responsible for the riot, what drove them to assault the French bakers? We will examine a number of possible explanations, including language barriers, anti-French sentiment, and food shortages, to see what role they might have played in starting the riot.
Responsibility for the Riot

Writing a few weeks after the riot occurred, an anonymous writer from Roxbury, a town just south of Boston, provided a brief summary of its aftermath:

None of the offending persons having been discovered, notwithstanding the reward that was offered, it may be feared that Americans were concerned in the riot; while political prudence charged it upon others, that less umbrage might be taken at the event. The count was much grieved at what had happened; but had too much calmness and good sense to charge it upon the body of the inhabitants, who were no less concerned at it than himself; so that it created no dissentions between them.

If our Roxbury author saw through the apparent attempts by American officials to cover up the details of the riot, other people in Boston must have shared similar suspicions. He has laid out two major reasons to doubt British involvement in the riot, a lack of arrests and the political expediency of blaming British sailors rather than American citizens, which we will now pick up and investigate. We will also examine several other factors that suggest the British were not to blame. Among these is the lack of evidence provided by American officials about British involvement and the inconsistency of their description of the rioters in their private correspondence. Additionally, the public efforts made to restore good faith between the Americans and the French suggest some level of doubt among the American officials about their own explanation. An examination of these factors will show that British involvement in the riot was unlikely.

Blaming British sailors for the riot held an obvious political attractiveness for the American officials in Boston. If the British could be blamed for the death of a French officer, it would provide a convenient scapegoat while preventing further damage to the alliance. In fact, any shared anger had the possibility to strengthen ties between the two countries by directing popular anger on both sides against a mutual enemy. While political expediency itself is not a reason to discount the official explanation, it should give one pause before accepting it. Relations
between the Americans and French had been tense since d’Estaing’s decision to withdraw from the Newport campaign. The French had already failed to assault New York City early in the summer and the subsequent failure of the American expedition to retake Newport, which many Americans including Major General John Sullivan, the commander at Newport, attributed to the absence of the French fleet, only made things worse. As a redirection for popular anger, this incident could not have come at a better time for the American leaders in Boston. Given the overwhelming political benefits of blaming the British, it is unlikely that political considerations did not play a role in assigning blame.

If British soldiers were to blame for the riot, one would expect a series of well-publicized arrests of British sailors to swiftly follow. However there is no record that any British sailors, or anyone else for that matter, being arrested or charged with a crime in relation to the riot. The absence of arrests is telling. The Massachusetts Council, the executive body of the state, issued a proclamation condemning the rioters and calling upon all government officials to help apprehend those responsible. It even promised a three hundred dollar reward for any information leading to the capture of those responsible. Given all of these efforts, it seems odd that no British sailors were arrested, if they were indeed responsible for the riot. A public trial would have served the interests of the American officials well, providing definitive proof of their commitment to the safety of their new allies. However, if the officials doubted the culpability of the British suspects, such a public trial could have been majorly embarrassing. Boston had a strong history of upholding the rule of law in the face of negative public opinion, most notably John Adams’ defense of the British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre. It is possible that American leaders feared a repeat of this situation and so were content to rely on rumor to do their work for
them. Regardless, the lack of arrests strongly suggests that the offenders of the official reports were little more than imaginings.

In addition to the lack of arrests, the lack of evidence against British sailors calls the official explanation into question. When writing to Vice Admiral Charles-Hector Count d’Estaing, commander of the French fleet at Boston, General Heath provided no evidence to support his accusation, simply stating, “Some of the hands belonging to the Marlborough privateer are suspected of being concerned in the riot. Orders are sent to the Castle to stop her until the matter is fully inquired into.” While not making explicit mention of the nationality of the hands, Heath is obviously trying to distance any Americans from possible suspicion as it turned out the hands in question were British. D’Estaing was quick to grab onto this explanation as a way to avoid further conflict, agreeing that, “Some sailors many of whom are deserters from the enemy like those said to be found on the Privateer Marlborough have proved no doubt suitable instruments to perform what has been done.” It seems that an unspoken agreement emerged between the two of them that, in the absence of any real evidence, British deserters onboard the Marlborough would be blamed. The speed at which this agreement was reached, in less than forty-eight hours, and the lack of evidence offered by Heath suggests that a motive other than fact prompted the accusations.

The inconsistency with which American leaders refer to the rioters in private correspondence also suggests a political motivation to blaming the British. In the very same letter where General Heath blamed the sailors from the Marlborough for starting the riot, he used the term “American” to describe the seamen involved in the fray. When writing to General Washington later the next day, Heath again identified those involved as “American.” The conversation among American leaders focused on the political ramifications of the riot and their
concern that Americans might indeed have been responsible is expressed in the language they used. Contrast this with one of the few newspapers to report on the riot, which wrote that the riot, “was begun, it’s said, by seamen captur’d in British vessels and some of Burgoyne’s army who had inlisted as privateers just ready to sail.”\textsuperscript{15} It appears that by 10 September, the public recorded was already firmly set against the British, while American leaders had yet to make such a firm decision, at least in private. That two different conversations were occurring at the same time, one in public blaming the British and one in private suggesting Americans were responsible, suggests a political motivation behind the public story. If there was clear evidence linking British sailors the incident, there is no reason this would not have appeared in the correspondence.

The plethora of social events hosted by the Americans for the French and vice versa also speaks to American officials’ doubts about their own explanation for the riot. In the weeks following the incident, the social elite of Boston held a number of lavish events to which a large number of French officers were invited. The \textit{Independent Chronicle} reported that, on the night of 25 September:

\begin{quote}
…at the invitation of the Government of this State, the Count d’Estaing and his officers dined at Fanevil Hall, with the Honourable Council and House of Representatives, the Continental officers in the land and sea service, the gentlemen of civil and ecclesiastical order, and a great number of other gentlemen – it is thought no less than 400, was seated at once at the several tables in the Hall. The entertainment was splended. The genuine joy was never observed to rise higher upon any public occasion; and the toasts, and every circumstance throughout the day, express’d it in the most lively manner; the great and mutual pleasure diffused by the present happy Union between France and these States; which British tyranny has now rendered so important to the interests of both nations.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

This event was one of several hosted both by the Americans and French over the course of the fleet’s time in Boston; D’Estaing returned the favor a few days later and hosted a large group of Boston notables aboard his flagship.\textsuperscript{17} If the leaders on both sides truly believed the British element in Boston to be responsible for the riot, there would have been no need for such
festivities. True, they also helped heal the wounds from Newport, but there was a noticeable increasing in their size and frequency following the riot, suggesting at the very least a correlation between the two. By hosting these parties, American officials recognized on some level the need to apologize for the riot and death of Saint-Sauveur. While such efforts undoubtedly represented good manners on their part as hosts, it also speaks to some level of guilt over the behavior of their own citizens. They understood some level of mistrust still existed between the Americans and the French, and after seeing the potential violence that could emerge, were determined to drown it in a flood of toasts and pleasantries.

The efforts of American leaders to wine and dine the French, along with the obvious political motivations for blaming the British for the riot, strongly suggests that British sailors were not, in fact, responsible for the death of Saint-Sauveur. As shown by the inconsistency between their own correspondence and the official reports, American leaders themselves doubted the veracity of their own version of the story. While they tried to publically pin the blame on the British, in private they expressed concern that Bostonians might have in fact been responsible for the incident. They were right to worry because if the French believed that Americans were responsible, it would have been a political nightmare.

Reasons for the Bostonians to Riot

Assuming for a moment that the worst fears of American officials were indeed true, and the townspeople of Boston were responsible for the riot and the death of Saint-Sauveur, what could have caused the Americans to turn against their new allies? A number of the historians have offered their own explanation for the riot, but none of these theories have proved fully satisfactory because their authors have focused on their own area of expertise and failed to account for other possible causes. Both Laurence Wylie and Esther Forbes have suggested that
the language barrier between the Bostonians and the French bakers helped spark the riot. In contrast, William Stinchcombe suggests that flour shortages in the city could have been responsible, although he ultimately finds this explanation unsatisfactory. We will examine both of these explanations, as well as the possibility that anti-French sentiment among the lower classes was responsible for the incident. While it is unlikely that any one of these factors alone caused the riot, we will try to determine which ones had a greater influence on the course of events.

The first of these explanations, that linguistic differences between the French bakers and those who approached them that night led to the riot, is the least convincing. One can easily imagine a group of American sailors and dockworkers approaching the French bakers, the air filled with the warm aroma of baking bread, and being unable to communicate their desire for some. The sources are maddeningly vague about whether the rioters demanded free bread or were offering to pay for it, but either way the French bakers refused to hand over any of their biscuit. Although they most likely could not understand the French bakers’ refusal, it must have been very clear to the crowd that they were being refused. It does not follow, though, that fighting would inevitably break out as a result of this misunderstanding. Moreover, it appears that the French had hired an American to act as the chief baker onshore, who would have been able to explain in English why he was unable to give them any of the bread. Thus, the explanation that language alone was the cause of the riot does cannot stand and it must be relegated to a secondary factor.

The explanation that a flour shortage in the city sparked the riot proves to be more compelling. If the people were desperate for bread and were presented with the prospect of freshly baked biscuit, it is unlikely that they would have let a few men speaking a language they
did not understand stand in their way. If anything, it probably would have made them angrier at
the apparent unfairness of foreigners eating *their* food while they went hungry. Under those
circumstances, it would not have been unsurprising for some type of violence to break out. The
food riot was a well-established popular tradition by the eighteenth century and many saw
violence as an appropriate recourse when one individual or group was unfairly depriving another
of food. If the authorities refused to take action to rectify the situation, it was not uncommon for
a mob to take matters into its own hands. Between 1775 and 1779, there were over thirty such
food riots in the former British colonies, six in Boston itself.\textsuperscript{22} Those involved in these riots were
rarely punished and those facing the French bakers probably assumed, rightly as it turned out,
that they could seize the bread without facing any judicial consequences. Especially given the
importance of bread in the diet of the urban lower classes during that time, a flour and bread
shortage would have provided a powerful incentive to attack the French bakers if they were seen
as withholding food.

This explanation is highly attractive, provided there was indeed a flour shortage in
Boston during the fall of 1778. On this point, historians are divided. William Stinchcombe, in his
book *The American Revolution and the French Alliance*, states that the riot occurred,
“supposedly over the shortage of bread. This explanation is unconvincing, because there were
three more riots in the following months when the bread shortage had lessened.”\textsuperscript{23} He however,
provides no evidence as to how these shortages were alleviated and the sources he cites provide
only the dates of the subsequent disturbances. In his book *In Irons*, Richard Buel provides a
possible explanation for how the city was able to avoid starvation, writing, “Despite its reliance
on food imports, Boston avoid major shortages until the winter of 1779, thanks to the prize goods
and imports that could be used to tease surpluses out of the countryside.”\textsuperscript{24} This explanation is
predicated on the availability of surpluses in the countryside, an availability which this essay will call into doubt. Additionally, it only applies only to those with access to tradable goods, a group that did not include the poorer workers and sailors who most likely comprised the majority of the rioters. A number of other historians, including Laurence Wylie, Esther Forbes, and Fitz-Henry Smith, have ascribed the riot of 8 September, as well as other disturbances with French sailors in the following weeks, to a lack of flour in the city. In order to untangle the situation and answer our question, we must examine the three major factors contributing to the flour situation in Boston: the economic situation of the city itself, the amount of provisions required by French fleet during its time in the city, and the demands of the American forces in and around Boston.

By the late colonial period, New England had ceased to produce enough grain to feed its population, especially with the growth of its larger towns. Production had shifted south to the mid-Atlantic colonies, especially Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, and by the 1750s most New England towns were importing flour and rice to feed their populations. This movement of food relied on seaborne trade routes, routes that were thrown into turmoil by the efforts of the British Royal Navy to intercept American trade and by the embargoes on exportation that state governments and Congress attempted to impose at various time. This left Boston in an especially hard-pressed situation, with British-occupied New York between it and its main supplies of grain by 1778. Not that it mattered much, because by the fall of that year the flour economy in the mid-Atlantic states was nearing collapse. For who had the money and were willing to risk either a dangerous sea journey or a circuitous shipment overland, there was the possibility of procuring some flour. However, few had those resources and those that did inevitably charged high prices for the flour they brought in. Thus, access to flour and bread became even more closely tied to economic status than before the war.
A number of historians, namely Richard Buel, have argued that privateering was able to supply the city with food when interstate trade broke down. He suggested that captured goods from prize ships were used to extract whatever agricultural surpluses were available around the city.\textsuperscript{29} Boston did see a large amount of privateering activity during 1778, with over 5000 tons worth of shipping libeled in the period immediately before and during the French fleet’s time in the city, lending credence to Buel’s theory.\textsuperscript{30} However, the ability to trade for captured goods was predicated on the availability of surpluses in the surrounding area. When the French fleet arrived, even with access to far more resources than any individual in Boston, it was only able to collect 2,000 barrels of flour in the vicinity of the city.\textsuperscript{31} The rest of their supplies had to be shipped from states further south. The need for the French to depend on supplies from so far away suggests a lack of surpluses around Boston. If these surpluses were lacking, as the evidence suggests, the competition for flour must have been intense. Those who had access to captured goods, especially rum and sugar from the Caribbean, commanded more purchasing power than those without them.\textsuperscript{32} Without access to such goods, most of the artisans and other workers in the towns could only complain of being left without anything to eat.

One possible explanation, supplied by our anonymous Roxbury author, might help explain Buel’s assertions. The Roxbury author claimed that, “New-England cruisers took such a number of provision vessels on their way from Europe to New-York, as not only supplied the wants of the French, but furnished an overplus…at Boston.”\textsuperscript{33} If such a claim were true, it would support Buel’s assertion that there were no food shortages in Boston during the fall of 1778 and buttress Stinchcombe’s doubts about shortages causing the riot. However, a careful examination of the prize ships brought into Boston does not support the Roxbury author’s claim. According to libel notices, postings from admiralty courts about the adjudication of prize ships in local
newspapers, at least 27 ships were captured and brought into Boston between August and early November 1778. According to Lloyd’s Register, on which most ships carrying provisions to the British army in America were registered, only 17 of these ships, totaling 1495 tons, might have been carrying provisions for the army. Even if every one of these ships were exclusively carrying flour, which is unlikely, it would not have been enough to supply the needs of the city, the French, and the American forces. So while it is possible that these ships lessened the burden on Boston, they could not have supplied the abundance mentioned by Buel. And even if they did provide some relief, that relief was not enough to prevent further disturbances between the Bostonians and the French in the following weeks.

To make matters worse, the depreciation of Continental and state currencies hampered the attempts of most people to acquire what flour was available. Since 1777, the paper money issued by the Continental Congress and the individual states had been rapidly depreciating. With the impending arrival of the French fleet in the spring of 1778, Congress fully committed to the practice of currency finance to fund the war effort. In effect, it agreed to keep issuing as much paper money as it needed to pay for the war, and especially to supply their French allies. While this guaranteed the short-term ability of the Commissariat to provide for the needs of the French, it also meant running the risk of even greater depreciation and possible bankruptcy. As the value of paper money dropped, New England farmers were less willing to bring whatever surpluses they had into the cities because they did not want to sell their crops at a loss. Legislative attempts to keep prices down only further encouraged farmers to keep their surpluses out of the city. Those who lacked access to valuables suitable for trade were thus increasingly unable to acquire flour.
Into this mess sailed the French fleet with over 10,000 sailors and soldiers onboard and very little left to feed them. The fleet had sailed from Toulon on 13 April 1778, carrying enough fresh water to last the fleet three months and enough dry provisions to last about four. By the time the fleet reached the eastern seaboard in early July, it had been at sea nearly three months meaning it would soon be running short of provisions. The need for water was especially pressing. Almost immediately following his arrival in Philadelphia, the French Minister to the United States, Conrad Alexandre Gerard, began attempting to secure supplies for the fleet.

The weeks following the arrival of the fleet were filled with a flurry of activity as Congress and various segments of the Continental supply system scrambled to assemble provisions for the French fleet. The Marine Committee took primary responsibility for coordinating the supplies from Philadelphia, with the Commissary General for Purchases, Jeremiah Wadsworth, being tasked with acquiring and providing the supplies. As the fleet moved north, various Continental officers, including General Washington himself, attempted to provide the fleet with provisions. These efforts bore little fruit. By the time the fleet arrived off of Newport, Rhode Island, in late July it had still not been supplied with its basic needs. It was especially hard up for fresh vegetables, fresh water, and bread. General Heath did his best to ship supplies from Boston, writing to General Washington,

Nearly our whole time for several weeks has been taken up in forwarding provisions, Stores &c. to Rhode Island, and in order to accelerate the operations of the Expedition we have sent to that place all the provisions that could possibly be spared from the Magazines, in particular flour, of which upwards of 1000 Barrels have been forwarded.

These efforts were to prove doubly embarrassing to the Americans because little of that flour reached the French at Newport before they were forced to withdraw in late August and it left the bread magazines near empty when the fleet arrived in Boston. In early August, General Sullivan,
commander of American forces at Newport, reported that the French fleet “has not more than twenty Days Provision on Hand.”

This was the condition of the French fleet’s provisions when it sailed in Boston on 29 August, effectively doubling the number of mouths to feed in the city in a single stroke. To feed the fleet for the two months it would be in Boston, as well as provision it for an expedition to the Caribbean, would require an amount of food that for the strained Continental supply system was truly prodigious. Major Borda, in his letter asking General Heath to assist in supplying the fleet, estimated that the fleet would need over a million pounds of flour for three months. Writing to General Washington, Heath expressed his doubts that such an amount could be assembled, writing, “but how this quantity can be procured here, especially the Flour, I cannot tell.” Indeed, such an amount would prove difficult to acquire even in the wheat producing states to the south, where the Commissary eventually turned to attempt to purchase it.

In addition to the pressing needs of the French fleet, the Commissary also needed to supply the American forces in the area around Boston at the same time. The army which remained with General Sullivan in Rhode Island and the Continental brigades around New York City were already stressing the supplies available in New England. The British decision to cease providing supplies for the Convention Army, prisoners captured at Saratoga, meant another 5,000 mouths to feed around Boston. The presence of the French fleet simply added to an already stressed system. Wadsworth was painfully aware of his stretched resources, writing regularly to both Washington and the Marine Committee to complain about the difficulty of obtaining supplies.

To make matters worse for the average Bostonian, the French fleet had brought with it a large supply of specie and bills of credit on the French government to assist them in buying
provisions. Once it became clear that the Commissary was unable to provide for his fleet’s needs in a timely fashion, d’Estaing took matters into his own hands. Commissioning a number of agents to purchase whatever flour they could in the greater Boston region, he was able to use hard currency and bills of credit to draw about 2,000 barrels of flour out of the surrounding countryside for the use of his fleet.48 While these purchases allowed d’Estaing to feed his men, it had the dual effect of removing a large quantity of flour from the market and simultaneously driving up prices for the flour that remained. By October, Peter Colt, an agent for the Commissary, reported that flour suppliers would only accept specie as payment.49 While this situation was advantageous for the French, it made the already challenging task of acquiring flour even more difficult for the lower classes in Boston because they only had access to the depreciated American currency.

Thus, the situation for the workers and artisans along Boston’s waterfront, the ones most likely to have been involved in the riot, was grim indeed in the fall of 1778. The depreciation of the paper currencies and the general collapse of waterborne trade between the states meant procuring flour was becoming increasingly difficult. What little flour was available for purchase was most likely going to merchants who had access to the kinds of goods farmers were willing to trade for. The demands of the American military forces in the region further strained the availability of supplies. Once the French began purchasing flour on their own, prices skyrocketed and those without access to specie must have had an even more difficult time purchasing flour. At least for the poorer townspeople of Boston, the fall of 1778 was almost undoubtedly one of acute shortage and want, lending credence to the explanation that hunger brought on by a shortage of flour and bread prompted the townspeople to assault the French bakers that night.
Along with the possibility of hunger as a motivating factor, anti-French sentiments almost certainly played a role in the riot. The French had been the colonial rivals of Britain’s American settlers for over a century and New England’s place bordering French Canada meant that many New Englanders had been actively engaged in hostilities against their French counterparts at some point during their lives. The conclusion of the French and Indian War (1754-63) had brought Canada under British control, but had not ended the animosity that many in the colonies felt towards their northern neighbors. Nor would it vanish as soon as the alliance with France commenced. Mercy Warren, writing to John Adams, lamented that, “…as there had not yet been time to prove the sincerity of either party, I think most of those officers who Remember the Late [French and Indian], War (when we Huged ourselves in the protection of Britain) Look as if they Wished, Rather than believed ancient prejudices Obliterated.”

While the sources make less mention of the feelings of the lower classes, they likely shared similar feelings towards the French. It is quite possible that some of the rioters had even served during the French and Indian War, giving them a very personal reason to distrust their new allies.

Even those who didn’t serve against the French directly grew up in an environment where public displays of anti-Catholic, and by extension anti-French, attitudes were common. The largest of these displays was the annual Pope Day parade, celebrated every 5 November in Boston and other American seaports. During this event, townspeople would parade through the streets with effigies of the Pope, the Devil, and the Stuart claimant to the throne and then burn them in a large bonfire. Pope Day, and other events like it, encouraged a strong Protestant ethos in the city and, by extension, undoubtedly contributed to an anti-Catholic and anti-French sentiment among the lower classes in Boston. Unlike members of Boston’s elite, who enjoyed ample opportunity to socialize with French officers and thus temper many of the anti-French
stereotypes they had grown up with, common people had very little interactions with the French. Without such interactions, there was nothing to dissuade them from their notion that the French were untrustworthy, effeminate, frog-eaters. To see these men who had been so long held in contempt apparently stealing bread off of their tables must have angered many of the hungry Bostonians.

In addition to these long-standing prejudices against the French, more recent events had contributed to an air of tension between the new allies. Following the aborted assault on New York City, d’Estaing and the fleet had sailed to Newport to assist General Sullivan in retaking the port. After several weeks of miscommunication and a hurricane that severely damaged a number of the French ships, d’Estaing decided to withdraw his fleet to Boston to refit and repair. General John Sullivan publicly censured d’Estaing for this decision and blamed him for the failure and subsequent withdrawal of the expedition. Tensions ran high and it appeared that a public scandal would result. Luckily, through the efforts of a number of American officers and the restraint of local newspapers, which refrained from publishing about the incident, such a scandal was narrowly avoided.

Although Sullivan latter apologized, many Americans shared his disappointment and anger. Having held such high hopes for the new alliance, to have the French sail to Boston apparently without having made any major contributions to the war effort was disappointing to say the least. James Warren, writing to Samuel Adams in early September, explained that in Boston, “we have a foolish spirit prevailing with rancour against the French for leaving Rhode Island.” While Warren was speaking specifically about the politicians in the legislature, such feelings weren’t confined to the elite. General Heath noted that,

…it is surprising to hear the unguarded and imprudent expression & writings of many on this occasion, the severe reflections which are thrown out I fear will give umbrage and if
care is not taken wound our great & good Cause. From the unthinking Multitude some indiscreet or unguarded expressions may be expected - I wish they may be from such only.\textsuperscript{56}

It is highly unlikely that this rancor subsided within a week of the fleet’s arrival in Boston and undoubtedly played a role in motivating the riot. There were several more violent incidents between French sailors and townspeople over the following weeks, on 26 and 27 September and on 5 October.\textsuperscript{57} These incidents being less well documented than the riot of 8 September, little it known about their specific circumstances or causes. However, the persistent conflict between the Bostonians and the French sailors suggests they were the result of an underlying tension between the two groups. As General Washington noted, disharmony between locals and the French sailors proved to be a far greater concern than conflicts of personal honor among the officers.\textsuperscript{58}

Conclusion

The alliance between the young United States and France perhaps never came closer to ending than on that fateful night in September 1778. A single misstep at any number of moments could have spelled the end of cooperation between the two nations and possibly a different outcome for the Revolution. The American leaders in Boston, specifically General William Heath, did their best to remove any possibility of blame from the townspeople by assigning it to British sailors serving on ships in the harbor. Given the lack of arrests or other evidence, it is impossible to say for certain who was responsible for assaulting the bakers that night in Boston. However, given the strong political motivations that existed for blaming the British, as well as the lack of evidence or consistency in the official American accounts regarding their involvement, it seems highly likely that townspeople from Boston were in fact responsible.

This conclusion seems all the more likely when considering the possible reasons for the Bostonians to riot. While the alliance with France ultimately helped secure American
independence, for several months it caused substantial hardship among the common people of Boston. The food shortage brought on by the presence of the French fleet and the large concentration of American forces and British prisoners in the region was the primary motivator of the riot, but lingering anti-French sentiment played an equally important part. The language barrier between the common Bostonian and the common French sailor also contributed to the incident. All told, the strength of the arguments for Bostonian responsibility outweigh those for British responsibility, suggesting that the townspeople of Boston were ultimately responsible.

This riot serves as a powerful reminder that revolutionary America was not a unified America and the experience of some groups differed greatly from the experience of the elites. While the alliance with France helped ease the prejudices of many American leaders, it also brought common Americans and Frenchmen into occasional conflict. The riot, and the wide-reaching political consequences it almost had, ultimately serves to remind us of the often forgotten power of the common people to influence the course of events. Driven by anti-French sentiment and a lack of bread, they came within an inch of irreparably changing the course of the Revolution.

4 Respecting a Memorial to Chevalier de St. Sauveur, Massachusetts S. Res. 336, 28 Apr 1905.
8 Major General John Sullivan, commander of the American forces at Newport, was unsparing in his initial criticism of d’Estaing following his withdrawal to Boston. For more on the failure of the Newport expedition, see John Hattendorf, *Newport, the French Navy, and the American Revolution*.
9 Smith, *The French at Boston*, p. 36.
10 Proclamation in Independent Chronicle, 10 Sept. 1778, Respecting a Memorial to Chevalier de St. Sauveur, p. 11.
11 William Heath to Vice-Admiral Comte d’Estaing, 9 Sept. 1778, Respecting a Memorial to Chevalier de St. Sauveur, p. 12.
12 d’Estaing to Heath, 10 Sept. 1778, Respecting a Memorial to Chevalier de St. Sauveur, pp. 13-4.
13 Heath to d’Estaing, 9 Sept. 1778, Respecting a Memorial to Chevalier de St. Sauveur, p. 12.
16 Independent Chronicle (Boston), 1 Oct. 1778.
21 d’Estaing to Heath, 10 Sept. 1778, Respecting a Memorial to Chevalier de St. Sauveur, pp. 13-4.
26 Buel, In Irons, pp. 10-20.
27 Buel, In Irons, p. 28.
28 Harlow, Economic Conditions, p. 169; Buel, Dear Liberty, p. 162.
29 b Buel, In Irons, p. 138.
30 Based on libel notices in Independent Chronicle (Boston), Boston Gazette, and the Continental Journal (Boston) between August and November 1778.
34 Based on libel notices in Independent Chronicle (Boston), Boston Gazette, and the Continental Journal (Boston) between August and November 1778.
35 Based on libel notices in Independent Chronicle (Boston), Boston Gazette, and the Continental Journal (Boston) between August and November 1778 and Lloyd’s Register of Shipping for 1778.
36 Harlow, Economic Conditions, p. 168.
37 Buel, In Irons, p. 125.
38 Harlow, Economic Conditions, p. 169.


Buel, *Dear Liberty*, p. 169.


Smith, *The French at Boston*, p. 43.

Washington to Heath, 22 Sept. 1778, Respecting a Memorial to Chevalier de St. Sauveur, p. 17.