

Experiment in Republicanism

*New Hampshire Politics and the
American Revolution, 1741–1794*

Jere R. Daniell



Harvard University Press

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the American Revolution, 1741-17

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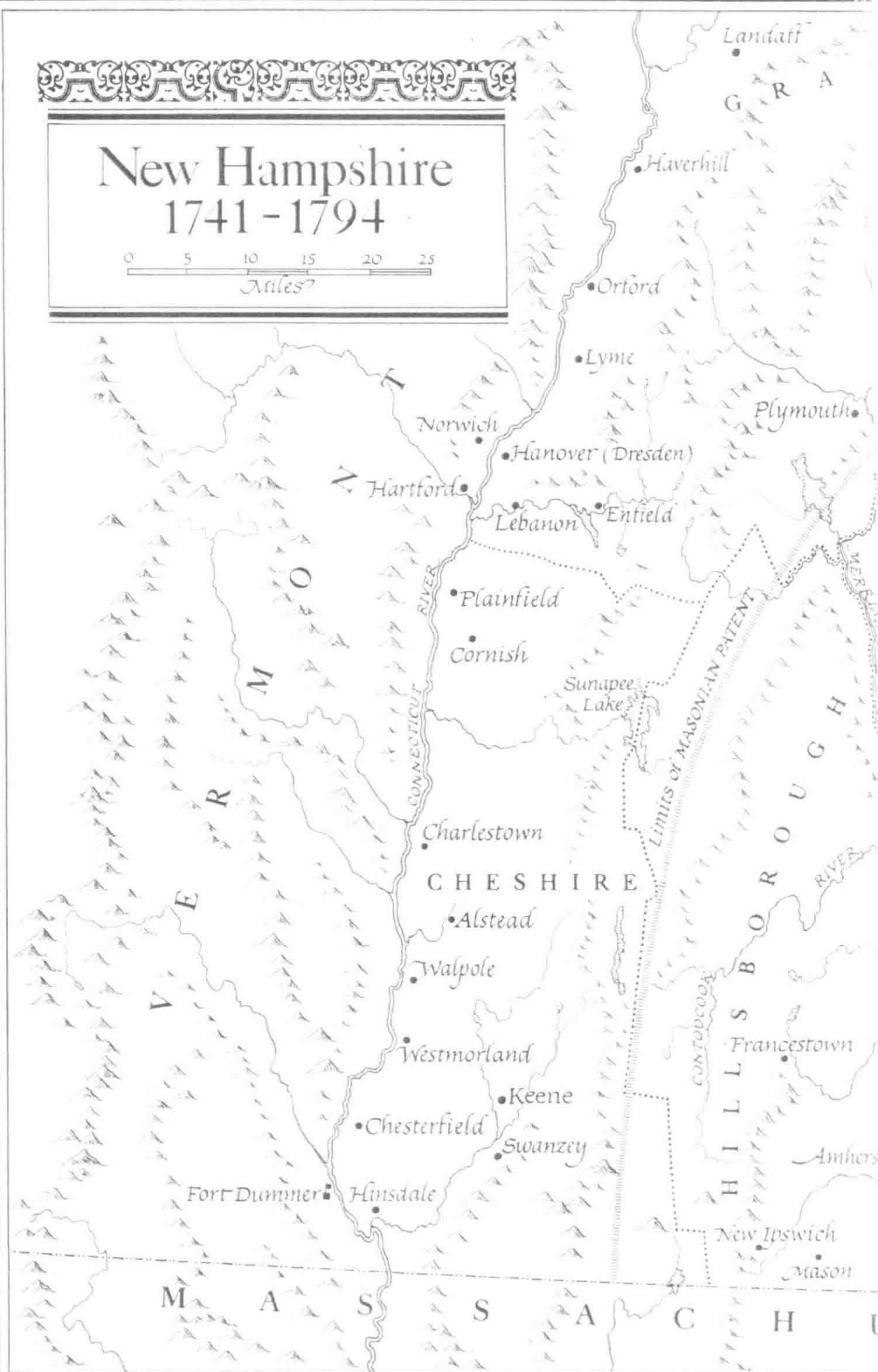
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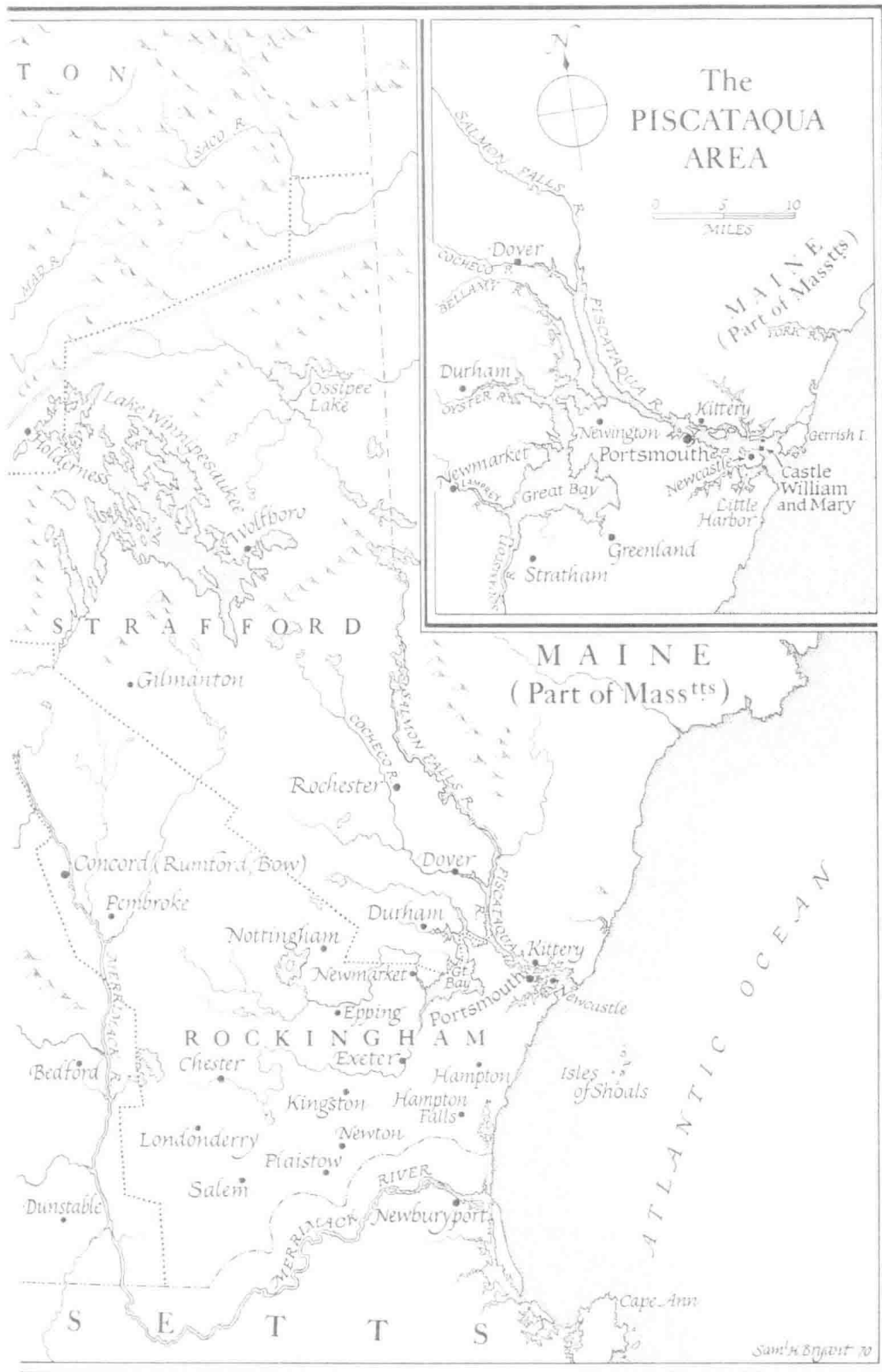
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New Hampshire 1741-1794

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To Elena

Preface

Twenty years ago historians were in general agreement about the nature of the American revolution. Events between 1765 and 1788, they felt, were part of an intense and constant struggle between groups of conservatives and radicals. Conservatives—eastern merchants, southern planters, and other men of wealth—considered themselves aristocrats and tried to create a political system to serve their class interests. Radicals, identified with the people as a whole, believed in a more democratic form of government and found support among debtors and small farmers. Both groups had their moments of triumph. The radicals gained control of political processes sometime after the Stamp Act crisis, led the movement for independence, and dominated both the Continental Congress and the state governments during the war. Ratification of the federal Constitution climaxed the conservative resurgence, which began as soon as the war ended. This broad interpretation was rarely questioned: virtually all the scholarly literature about the revolution published since the turn of the century had provided detailed evidence to support it.

Today no such consensus exists. A massive and highly effective attack has been made on the scholarship of the most influential of the earlier works, Charles Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*. State and local studies have shown that in many areas political divisions did not reflect a pattern of conflict between rich and poor, creditor and debtor, merchant and farmer. We now know that most revolutionists, even those who led the movement

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for independence, thought that men of wealth, education, and social prestige should manage public affairs and had no desire to create a "democratic" form of government. Many writers have reacted against explanations of individual and group behavior cast solely in terms of economic self-interest by emphasizing ideology as a determinant of political action. Others insist that the main weakness of the old interpretation lay in its failure to consider adequately the way in which local conditions affected politics, not in its assumptions about the nature of human motivation.

What the literature since World War II adds up to is far from clear. Evidence presented by regional historians appears too complex and idiosyncratic to permit any but the vaguest generalizations about the relationship between socio-economic status and political commitment on specific issues. It seems clear that "conservatism" and "radicalism" have outlived their usefulness as unifying concepts, but there is no agreement on the terms in which revolutionary politics might more accurately be discussed. The differences between those emphasizing the economic sources of political behavior and those impressed by the degree to which the revolutionists acted in accordance with their political beliefs cannot be resolved; they are too deeply rooted in incompatible concepts of human psychology among historians themselves. Given all this, it is not surprising that writers adept at criticizing their predecessors have failed to produce a fresh interpretation of the revolutionary era as a whole.

The present study may add to the confusion. To begin with, it presents additional proof of the way in which purely local circumstances affected the course of political development in late-eighteenth-century America. The immense influence of the Wentworth family gave New Hampshire a uniquely stable governmental structure in the years before 1774. Constitutional conditions in the colonial period, especially the lack of broad representation in the assembly, accentuated the degree to which revolution disrupted the pattern of state authority. Population growth, from about 40,000 at mid-century to over 140,000 in 1790, created a host of problems for both imperial and revolutionary magistrates. The presence of three major river systems intensified sectional attitudes and made political integration difficult.

Furthermore, the history of New Hampshire tends to validate claims of both older writers and their critics. Some political strug-

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gles did pit merchants against farmers, debtors against creditors, and easterners against inhabitants in the interior. Some New Hampshiremen did see the revolution as a vehicle for destroying the power of the rich and wellborn and reacted in the 1780s against what they thought was a systematic attempt by these same men to deprive the people as a whole of the benefits of political independence. The revolutionists may not have believed in democracy, but they introduced many reforms which we would consider democratic: qualifications for voting and officeholding were reduced, participation in state politics became more widespread, and rulers found it more difficult to ignore popular criticism. On the other hand, the case of New Hampshire reveals fully the inadequacies of the earlier conceptual framework. The terms "radical" and "conservative" have little meaning unless applied to specific issues. State politics reflected what William Nesbit Chambers has called the "indigenous, deeply-rooted, conflicting pluralism" of American life as a whole. Kinship patterns, sectional interests, personal ambition, the desire for social order, constitutional beliefs, disappointed expectations, and irrational fears all influenced political behavior. Each of these ingredients plays an important role in my description and explanation of events.

My study does, however, illustrate certain phenomena I consider true of late-eighteenth-century America as a whole. The experience of New Hampshire's colonial rulers in the decade after 1765 was in many ways "typical"; therefore, the process described in Chapter 2 may have broader application as an interpretation of the coming of revolution. Moreover, the revolution in New Hampshire had an impact on politics similar to that in many other colonies. It weakened the effective power of those whose economic, political, and social interests were bound up within the imperial system and resulted in the greater distribution of authority among local elites. It made possible the creation of a constitutional structure consistent with the needs of a rapidly expanding population of men accustomed to a high degree of communal autonomy. It involved a dramatic shift in assumptions about the nature of government and the relationship between individual citizens and that government. It necessitated the development of political techniques rarely employed in the colonial period. Finally, my story should remind us that the American revolution was much more than a movement for national

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independence. The revolutionists themselves considered national affairs of secondary importance. Before the late 1780s they assumed that state and local institutions would be able to satisfy their basic governmental needs, and they accepted the federal constitution partly because it left the management of most affairs in the hands of locally elected officials. We cannot understand what the revolution meant to those who lived through it until we learn more about their experience at the state and local level.

This study could not have been completed without the help of others. Bernard Bailyn not only taught me much of what I know about colonial history but guided by research efforts and offered constant critical advice. William Abbott suggested important revisions in Chapter 1, as did Phillip Benjamin for Chapter 4. Michael Kammen gave me several bibliographical references I might otherwise have missed. D. H. Watson located useful manuscript collections in England. Sally Daniell helped with writing style and typed more versions of the manuscript than either she or I care to remember; Donna Musgrove typed the final draft. Staff members in the various document repositories were thoroughly cooperative. I would also like to thank Dartmouth College for the research assistance and the faculty fellowship which allowed me to complete my work.

Chapter 1 appeared, in virtually the same form, as "Politics in New Hampshire under Governor Benning Wentworth, 1741-1767," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 23 (1966), 76-105, and is reprinted with permission. Sir William Ramsden has allowed me to quote from the Rockingham Letters deposited in Sheepscar Library, Leeds, England. I have modernized the spelling and punctuation of quotations throughout the book.

Jere R. Daniell

Hanover, New Hampshire
September 1969

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Abbreviations

BLDC	Baker Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H.
HSP	Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
LC	Library of Congress, Washington
MHS	Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston
NEHGR	<i>New England Historical and Genealogical Register</i>
NHA	New Hampshire Archives, Concord
NHHS	New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord
NHSL	New Hampshire State Library, Concord
NHSP	<i>New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers</i>
NYHS	New-York Historical Society, New York
NYPL	New York Public Library, New York
PA	Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.
PCSM	<i>Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts</i>
PRO	Public Record Office, London
WMQ	<i>William and Mary Quarterly</i>

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Part I
Colonial Politics
and the
Coming of Revolution



Benning Wentworth (1696–1770). Portrait by Joseph Blackburn painted in 1760.