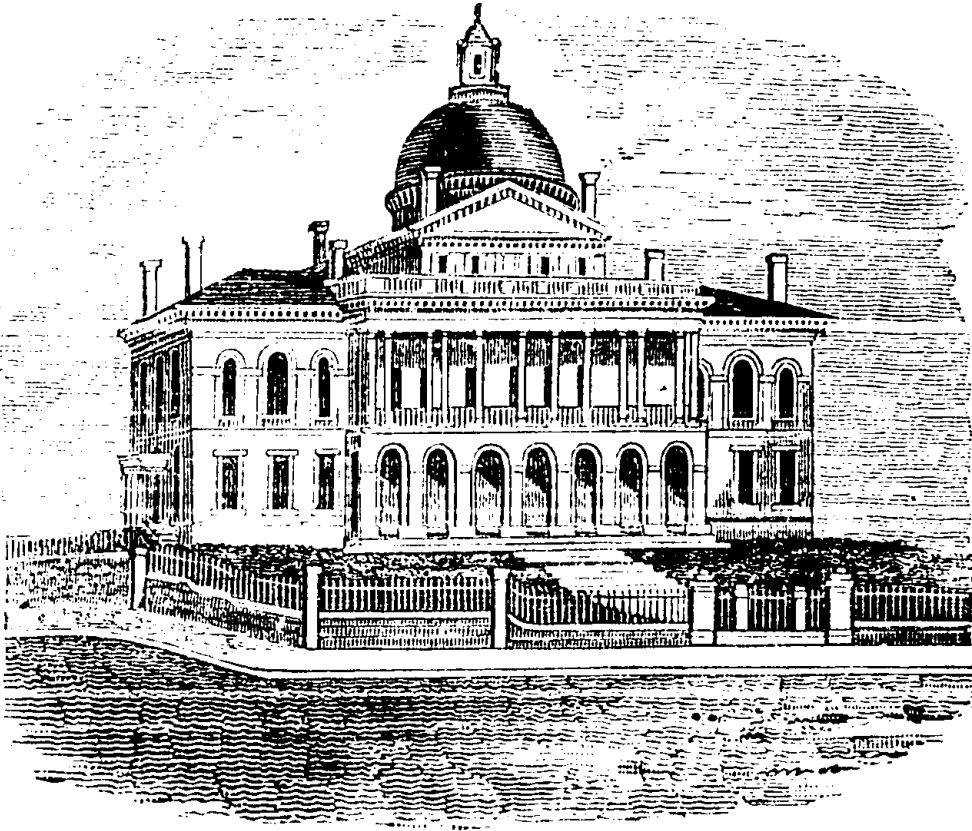


HISTORY OF BOSTON.



BY ROBIN CARVER.

BOSTON :

LILLY, WAIT, COLMAN, AND HOLDEN.

1834.

CHAPTER VIII.

James Otis. Writs of assistance. Mr Otis undertakes the cause of the Merchants. Trial. Mr Gridley. Speech of Otis. Stamp act. Liberty Tree. Mob. Attack on Mr Oliver's House.

1. WE are now coming to more unquiet times. The troubles, which finally led to the American Revolution, had commenced. Oppressive measures on the part of England were followed by resistance and violence in the colonies. In part of this chapter, I shall tell you about Mr James Otis, who was one of the earliest patriots.

2. Mr Otis was born in Barnstable in the year 1724. He received his education at Harvard College, and commenced the study of the law. After practising in his profession for two years at Plymouth, he removed to Boston. Here he soon distinguished himself, and his business became very extensive.

3. In 1759, Great Britain formed the plan of raising a

revenue from the colonies. The first evidence of this intention was given in the following year. An order was then received by the custom-house officers in America, to apply to the Supreme Court for what were called writs of assistance. These writs were to authorize the persons holding them, to enter any ships, stores or houses, upon mere suspicion, and search for goods that had been imported in violation of the English acts of trade.

4. This power was of course very oppressive and odious. The custom-house officers, however, applied to the court for the writs, and the court appointed a time when the propriety of granting them should be discussed. Mr Otis at this time held the office of advocate-general, and he was consequently called upon to render his services in support of the king's officers. Thinking the writs prayed for to be tyrannical and oppressive, he refused, and resigned his office.

5. Being immediately applied to by the merchants on the other side, he undertook their cause, in conjunction with Mr Thacher. He was at this time in the vigor of manhood, and of intellect. The trial took place in the council chamber of the old town-house. In those days there was a good deal of pomp in court dignity. The judges were dressed in robes of scarlet, faced with black velvet; huge wigs enveloped their heads, and curled down over their shoulders. The barristers appeared before the court, in black gowns, and with powdered hair and bags.

6. The cause excited very deep interest in all classes. Government officers were anxious to know whether they were to receive the writs, that would give them so much power, and perhaps enrich them with great wealth. Citizens and merchants were equally desirous to learn, if their houses were to be sacred, or to be open to the curiosity and avarice of every petty officer of the customs, who chose to disturb them with his suspicions.

7. Mr Jeremiah Gridley, a learned and eminent lawyer, was at this time attorney-general, and supported the cause of those who petitioned for the writs. He was very ingenious and powerful in his argument. Mr Thacher followed him on the opposite side, in a learned and convincing refutation.

8. Of the speech pronounced on this occasion by Mr Otis, we have the very highest praise from the elder President Adams. He says that Otis was a flame of fire, and, with a rapid torrent of impetuous eloquence, hurried away all before him. 'American independence,' he continues, 'was then and there born. Every man, of an immense crowded audience, appeared to me to go away as I did, ready to take arms against writs of assistance.'

9. The Court adjourned for consideration, and though they then came to no conclusion on the subject, nothing more was heard or said about the writs. I have told you particularly about this trial, because it is a very important point of our history. From this time parties began to be

formed, of the friends of the king, and the friends of the colonies. The people of Boston from this period, entertained but very little affection for their friends on the other side of the water.

10. In 1765 the king of England, George III, gave his consent to the famous Stamp Act. You have heard of this act, and as it led to the most important results, I shall explain it to you at length. It laid a tax or duty, on every piece of vellum, parchment or paper, on which any thing of use to any person could be written or printed. This tax varied from half a penny to twenty shillings.

11. This stamp was to have been put on every possible document. Newspapers, almanacks, cards, marriage certificates, writs of court, custom-house papers, all these were to bear the stamp and pay for it. When popular feeling was at its height on this subject in the colonies, news was received in Boston that a cargo of these papers might be daily expected in the harbor. It was also rumored that Andrew Oliver, Esq., secretary of the province, had been appointed a distributor of the stamps.

12. It is at this time that the Liberty Tree first comes into notice. This tree formerly stood, with a noble grove of elms, at the head of Essex street. It was immediately in front of a house opposite to the Boylston Market. On the morning of the fourteenth of August, a couple of images were found hanging from this tree, one of which was intend-

ed to ridicule Mr Oliver. The other was a boot, with a grotesque figure peeping out of it, having the stamp act in its hand, intended to represent Lord Bute, who had done much in parliament to promote American taxation.

13. Very little business was done during the day. People collected in knots about the streets, talking of the stamp act, and British officers, and Liberty Tree. Large numbers came in from the towns in the neighborhood, to learn what was going on, and to join in the expression of popular feeling.

14. The mob gradually increased and became more formidable. A little after twilight they formed a procession, and carried the effigy from Liberty Tree to the town-house, where they knew that the governor and his council were holding a consultation. Here they gave three shouts, and passed on to Kilby street. In this place a building had just been erected by Mr Oliver, which they supposed was intended for a stamp office.

15. This they immediately levelled with the ground, and carried off the remains in triumph upon their shoulders. Proceeding to Fort hill, where Mr Oliver then resided, they made a bonfire in front of his house, and on it burned the effigy. They then broke the windows, tore down the garden fences, and at length obtained complete possession of his house.

16. Towards twelve o'clock at night, the mob began to

become less noisy, and an attempt was made by the government officers to disperse them. These gentlemen, however, were unsuccessful, and received rather harsh treatment from the hands of some of the ringleaders. At length about midnight all was again quiet.