

The Dilemma of Elizabeth Murray's Shopkeeper Friends¹

By the time of the tax crises of the 1760s, Elizabeth Murray had retired from business. But several of her shopkeeping friends were caught in the boycott conflict. For example, Elizabeth Murray's good friend Jane Eustis was one of seven women who signed a boycott agreement in response to the Townshend Act of 1767. She promised not to import any goods for a year. When the boycott ended the following year and another list was circulated, she did not add her name. Eustis found that her decision this time put her in conflict with popular opinion. After being named in the press as an importer in October 1769, she announced her decision to quit shopkeeping. The next month she took out a large front-page advertisement in the *Boston Gazette*, asking those indebted to her to settle their accounts promptly; "otherwise," she warned, "they may depend upon being sued...without Distinction." She wanted to clear out her wares, which consisted of cloth and "a variety of other goods," including three cases of blue and white china dishes, coffee cups, and saucers, which she had planned to sell "at a very low Advance for Cash." By May 1770 her business had declined. Forced to return the goods she had imported, Jane Eustis suffered greatly. Her income and credit were tied up in goods that she could not sell. Yet she was far from alone in encountering hostility.

Ame and Elizabeth Cuming, two shopkeeping protégés of Elizabeth, quickly discovered that their business activities exposed them to public pressure and criticism. On October 5, 1769, the *Boston Chronicle* printed the names of local traders who imported goods. Over the course of the next several months, the Cumings were repeatedly criticized in the *Boston Gazette* for violating the boycott. When the sisters reported their experiences to Elizabeth Murray, they expressed surprise that their economic activities had inspired so much resentment. (See the letter from Elizabeth Cumings to Elizabeth [Murray] Smith in 1769.)

Aware that the sisters were selling imported goods, a committee of merchants had come to their shop to investigate their activities. When questioned, Elizabeth Cuming told the men that she and her sister had never signed onto any boycott because their business was very small and necessary to their survival. They had to keep shop to support themselves, she told them. Not satisfied with the sisters' response, the merchants asked the women to hand over the goods they had imported. The Cumings, however, could not comply. By the time the committee visited their shop, the sisters had already unpacked their wares and sold some of them.

Elizabeth Murray received even more discouraging news from her friend Christian Barnes. Even after Christian's husband, Henry, was named as an enemy in the press, he still intended to advertise his goods. Christian thought this act would stir up the mobs. She urged him not to be the first shopkeeper to advertise his goods. When goods arrived for him, a committee from the Sons of Liberty waited on Henry to demand the wares be stored rather than displayed for sale. Concerned, Christian hoped that the power of the committee's leaders would collapse as soon as Bostonians saw the merchants as she did: as bullies only looking for personal gain. Christian also expressed her opinion that peace would soon return.

Unfortunately, Christian Barnes was mistaken. When both the Cuming sisters and Henry Barnes refused to stop their business activities, they were publicly criticized. In March 1770 a town meeting voted to condemn their actions. Unanimously, the council approved a motion to enter their names, along with those of ten other traders, into the records of the town "that POSTERITY may know who those Persons were that preferred their little private Advantage to the common Interest of the Colonies." Corrupt and greedy, they stood out when all other traders suspended importations in order "to obtain a redress of the Grievances so loudly and Justly complained of." By continuing to import and sell goods "with a design to enrich themselves," Elizabeth Murray's protégés and friends excited the "Astonishment and Indignation" of the

town, whose representatives expressed their surprise and disgust “that any of its Citizens should be so lost to the feelings of Patriotism and the common Interest, and so thoroughly and infamously selfish.”²

Throughout the spring, attacks on those accused of importing goods increased. After the Boston Massacre, especially, the town was “in a most shocking situation,” according to Elizabeth Murray’s good friend, merchant Gilbert Delbois. Delbois was chased through the streets, called “Importer,” and pelted with old shoes. A mob ransacked both his house and shop. Friends insisted that his life was in danger, that the mob planned to tar and feather him, and that he should allow goods that had recently arrived to be shipped back to England rather than insist on their being stored. (See the primary source on tarring and feathering.) Both he and Jane Eustis were forced to return their orders. Shortly thereafter, a group of townspeople made an effigy of Christian Barnes’s husband, labeled it “infamous importer,” hung the figure all day, and burned it that night. Then a letter attacking Henry Barnes was discovered, probably written by members of the same mob that had made the effigy and attacked a wagon full of goods belonging to him. Soon, news from the Cuming sisters arrived, with reports of angry crowds carting those they opposed out of town in a shameful manner. The violence was coming frighteningly close.

¹ This section adapted with the permission of the publisher from Cleary, *Elizabeth Murray: A Woman’s Pursuit of Independence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 133-141.

² Boston Registry Department, *Report of the Record Commissioners: Boston Town Records* (Boston, 1876-1909), 19:16 (19 March 1770), cited in Cleary, 137.