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“A Spirit of Faction”:

The Essex Junto and the Decline of the Federalist Party

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Introduction

On a chilly Connecticut day in 1815, the Hartford Convention adjourned after nearly a month of top-secret deliberation. This convention, organized for the purpose of addressing Federalist grievances amid the costly and unpopular War of 1812, turned out to be one of the most controversial and divisive events in early American history. Although the convention’s proceedings were shrouded in mystery and its delegates sworn to secrecy, the resolutions it yielded—including the prohibition of any trade embargo lasting over sixty days and the requirement that each president be from a different state than his predecessor—would fuel accusations of corruption, treason, and elitism against the Federalist Party until their subsequent dissolution just nine years later.

How, one might ask, did American political discourse deteriorate to the point at which a secretive convention of Federalist elites discussed New England secession as a distinct possibility? For many Democratic-Republicans at the time, it was clear that the culprit was none other than a radical group of northern Federalists hailing from Essex County, Massachusetts. This conservative splinter of the Federalist Party was aptly—and pejoratively—referred to as the

“Essex Junto.” Like many radical political factions throughout history, this small group of New England Federalists contributed significantly to the political and sectional polarization of its time—one of propaganda, widespread mistrust, and deep-seated conspiracy theories.

There are two schools of thought regarding the true nature of the Essex Junto. The first, outlined in David Fischer’s piece “The Myth of the Essex Junto,” calls the very existence of the Junto into question, claiming that it was merely the brainchild of conspiratorial Jeffersonians across the aisle. The second, articulated in Dinah Mayo-Bobee’s dissertation “Understanding the Essex Junto: Fear, Dissent, and Propaganda in the New Republic,” argues that the Junto was not a myth, but a legitimate player on the early American political stage, albeit one whose main function was merely as a “propaganda tool.”¹ This study will seek to reconcile these two arguments in order to decide both the true nature of the Junto and their role in the ultimate dissolution of the Federalist Party.

Fischer’s “The Myth of the Essex Junto” is arguably the most prominent piece of scholarship regarding this topic. Fischer argues in his 1964 treatise that the Junto’s historiographical imprint materialized not during the years in which it supposedly existed, but in the decades following the dissolution of the Federalist Party. The Junto was, Fischer contends, not a salient group with a defined set of goals, but rather a mythologized manifestation of widespread fear on the part of Democratic-Republicans that their political opponents would ultimately tear the Union apart.² The “myth” of the Essex Junto was therefore created not by the group of Massachusetts Federalists it supposedly included, but by Jeffersonian Democrats on the

¹ Dinah Mayo-Bobee, “Understanding the Essex Junto: Fear, Dissent, and Propaganda in the Early Republic,” *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2015): 623–656.

² David H. Fischer, “The Myth of the Essex Junto,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1964): 191.

opposite end of the ideological spectrum who sought to incite widespread fear and loathing towards their political opponents.

Published decades later in 2015, Dinah Mayo-Bobee’s “Understanding the Essex Junto” decidedly contradicts Fischer’s skeptical viewpoint. This piece discusses the Junto as both a legitimate faction and a target for propaganda that significantly contributed to the political and ideological polarization of America’s nascent government. Mayo-Bobee’s study looks specifically at the evolution of the term “Essex Junto,” which “eventually, almost naturally, transcended its association with Massachusetts Federalists.”³ In contrast with Fischer’s claims, Mayo-Bobee points out that references to the Junto in primary source documents date back to as early as 1774, when reports that a New England junto had formed a powerful voting bloc that posed a serious threat to Republican government.⁴ Subsequent years saw a precipitous increase in public perception of a powerful, elite group of Federalist conspirators in Massachusetts, solidifying the role of the Essex Junto—exaggerated or not—as a frequent tenet of early American political discourse.

The truth lies somewhere in the middle of these assertions, between the extremes of dramatized myth and indisputable fact. In reality, the Essex Junto was not a mere figment of the Jeffersonian imagination, nor was it a hegemonic coalition of treasonous elites. Instead, it was a small and veritable faction of the Federalist Party whose power was derived from the controversy it evoked. By capitalizing on widespread fear of a Federalist coup through demonization of the dreaded junto from Essex County, Jefferson and his lackeys effectively cultivated the “myth” surrounding a very real voting bloc, effectively outsize its influence and ensuring the downfall of the Federalist Party.

³ Mayo-Bobee, “*Understanding the Essex Junto*,” 625.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 626.

The Essex Junto and Extremism in Early America

By the 1790s, the Federalist Party was in a state of crisis. Support for the party had begun to wane in the South as New England Federalists publicly declared their support for a repeal of the Three-Fifths Clause.⁵ To make matters worse, the newly-formed Democratic Republicans were continually attacking them in the press with accusations of Anglophilia, criticism of John Jay's controversial treaty with Britain, and condemnation of the Alien and Sedition Acts.⁶ The most sinister threat to the existence of the Federalist Party, however, proved to be a small group of Massachusetts elites known as the Essex Junto. The purported existence of this sinister faction caused Federalist support in both New England and the Mid-Atlantic states to atrophy amid whispers of a pro-Britain, anti-democracy agenda.⁷ The influence of this small group on political discourse was so salient, in fact, that Thomas Jefferson himself wrote in an 1808 letter to Levi Lincoln that his primary goal was to "strip all of the means of influence of the Essex Junto, and their associate monocrats."⁸ But how, one might ask, did this small group have such a salient influence on early American politics? The answer to this query is simple: It didn't.

Each member of the so-called "junto" individually possessed the wealth, prestige, and upper-class predilections necessary for political influence, but as a unit their political clout was highly exaggerated in politics and the media. In actuality, the Essex Junto was simply a small social circle of prominent Massachusetts men who espoused a set of elitist political views that deemed them a useful propaganda tool in a society gripped by fears of autocracy and disunion.

⁵ Ibid., 630.

⁶ Mayo-Bobee, "Understanding the Essex Junto," 630.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson to Levi Lincoln, 11 July 1808, Jefferson Papers.

They were certainly not a “myth” as Fischer contends, but they were not particularly influential as a voting bloc, especially with the additional representation granted to the southern states by the Three-Fifths Compromise. Instead, the true source of their impact was the popular fear and loathing their reputation garnered towards the Federalists until their decline in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Understanding the Junto and its place in early American politics requires a baseline understanding of the group’s origins. Although historians have yet to reach a consensus on the true nature of the organization or the extent of its influence on early American politics, it is widely known that the Junto was comprised of twelve prominent men from Essex County: Fisher Ames, George Cabot, Francis Dana, Nathan Dane, Benjamin Goodhue, Stephen Higginson, Jonathan Jackson, John Lowell, Theophilus Parsons, Timothy Pickering, Israel Thorndike, and Nathaniel Tracy.⁹

The association between these men can be traced back to colonial times, before the American Revolution catapulted them into the realm of political influence. They each hailed from Essex County, Massachusetts (with the exception of Dana, Jackson, and Ames, who were natives of the Boston area) and came from deeply-rooted New England families.¹⁰ Their lineage could, for the most part, be traced back to the beginnings of the Bay Colony, where their ancestors worked as prominent lawyers, ministers, and magistrates.¹¹ The majority of the “Essexmen,” as they were called, graduated from Harvard, whereupon they worked as merchants, lawyers, and public servants.¹² Further, each of them possessed the social capital, forceful temperament, and vital talents needed to reach the upper echelons of early American

⁹ David Fischer, “The Myth of the Essex Junto,” 195.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

society. Fisher Ames, for example, was widely considered “the recognized literary champion of Boston,” while the Junto’s alleged leader, Timothy Pickering, had the political prowess and “angular” personality to earn him a spot in Washington’s cabinet as Secretary of State.¹³

The institution of marriage further reinforced the shared social and economic interests of this exclusive social circle. Stephen Higginson’s two sisters married John Lowell and George Cabot, further solidifying the connection between these influential families.¹⁴ In a society ostensibly without political parties, the result of these elite intermarriages was a “union of political influence” that marked the nexus of power in Essex County.¹⁵ Thus the most controversial political faction of the early nineteenth century was born of the rigid social order of colonial New England.

The term “Essex Junto,” as well as the group’s status as a political entity, was forged amid the controversy surrounding the Massachusetts State Constitution, well before the establishment of political parties.¹⁶ When the Massachusetts General Court drafted a state constitution and presented it to the people in 1778, the document was struck down by the people due to its lack of emphasis on executive power. The leaders of the opposition were, not surprisingly, a group of politicians from Essex County who believed in the necessity of a strong central government.¹⁷ The group convened in April of 1778 to create a pamphlet of eighteen articles outlining their objections to the state constitution, the contents of which were published and popularly referred to as “the Essex Result.”¹⁸ A committee of mostly Essexmen then drafted a new constitution that allocated more power to the executive. This constitution was adopted in

¹³ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁴ David Fischer, “The Myth of the Essex Junto,” 195.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Charles D. Brown, “The Northeastern Confederacy: According to the Plans of the Essex Junto, 1796-1814” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1921), 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

1778, and with it the name “Essex Junto,” coined by John Hancock, to describe the men who created it.¹⁹

It was around this time that rumors broke out throughout the colonies that an upper class clique, “mostly of New England men,” had formed a powerful voting bloc in the Northeast.²⁰ Word quickly spread about the group of New England politicians who had single-handedly thwarted the initial Massachusetts Constitution in favor of a new one of arguably aristocratic designs. Colonists viewed this purported coalition as a distinct threat to republican government, with Rhode Island governor David Howell privately criticizing the “hood-winking” tactics they supposedly employed to advance an elitist political agenda.²¹ In 1779, a letter revisiting this rumor appeared on the front page of *The Pennsylvania Evening Post*, publicly alleging that a New England junto established during the First Continental Congress convened frequently to “obstruct any measure whatever.”²² Despite efforts by Higginson and Ellsworth to quash this pervasive theory, the *Post*’s publication was followed by a series of similar accusations in the press that a secretive group of New England elites was exercising an outsized influence on political proceedings.²³

The rumor of the Junto was a side effect of the widespread and deep-seeded distrust of Massachusetts among colonists, many of whom denounced the region as a hotbed for corruption and elitism. The Revolution crystallized these preexisting prejudices, so much so that sectional jealousies and conflicts even began to emerge within the state itself. As people throughout the state and the nation grew more and more distrustful of the dreaded “Essexmen,” private

¹⁹ Ibid, 9.

²⁰ John Adams to Hugh Hughes, 4 June 1776 and Samuel Adams to James Warren, 16 April 1776.

²¹ David Howell to unknown recipient, 28 July 1783.

²² *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 9 July 1779.

²³ Mayo-Bobee, “Understanding the Essex Junto,” 626.

speculation of conspiracy and factionalism ultimately led to public conjecture that this small but powerful group was secretly controlling political proceedings and propelling the fledgling nation towards tyranny. This ubiquitous fear was exacerbated by the development of political parties in the late eighteenth century and the adversarial culture of accusations, conspiracies, and factionalism that followed.

Party Politics and Polarization in the New Republic

“The common and continual mischief’s [*sic*] of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and the duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it.”²⁴ These were the famous last words of George Washington’s presidency in his 1796 Farewell Address.

Unfortunately for Washington, his quixotic vision of America’s future ultimately proved to be no match for the competing visions of democracy that characterized subsequent decades. The sectional and ideological differences that characterized the fledgling nation eventually manifested themselves in the creation of the two party system, in which the two contrasting sides of the political spectrum were diametrically opposed in nearly every respect.²⁵ A far cry from the individualistic rhetoric of the Revolution, the partisan divisions universally feared by statesmen proved to be a hallmark of early American politics.

The foundations of America’s first formal political party, the Federalists, can be traced back to Alexander Hamilton’s stint as Secretary of the Treasury in the Washington administration. A self-proclaimed Anglophile, Hamilton sought to fit the new Republic into an

²⁴ George Washington, *Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States*.

²⁵ Gordon Wood. *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (The Legal Classics Library, 2014): 50-55.

anglicized mold, one with all the trappings of a European monarchy. Hamilton was famous—or notorious, depending on one’s ideological leanings—for his emphasis on strong federal governance, which manifested itself in his ambitious economic program. This contentious blueprint for the American economic system, which involved the creation of a national bank and the federal assumption of state debts, resulted in widespread controversy. Thus the Treasury Secretary embarked on a nationwide campaign to garner support for his cause, making connections with like-minded statesmen in each of the country’s major cities. Proponents of federal consolidation of government power, inspired by Hamilton’s rhetoric, soon formed a political coalition that eventually branded itself the Federalist Party.²⁶ From then on, the influence of political parties—once believed to be the greatest threat to republican governance—would maintain an iron grip on American politics.

The rise of the Federalists resulted in the creation of another party on the opposite end of the political spectrum: the aptly-named Anti-Federalists, who eventually evolved into the Democratic-Republican Party. As Hamilton continued to advertise his ambitious economic plan, his Federalist agenda was met with fervent opposition from another member of Washington’s cabinet. Then-Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, brimming with idyllic visions of an agrarian paradise, saw the Federalists’ emphasis on federal power as an affront to the republican ideals born of the American Revolution.²⁷

Antagonized by the creation of Hamilton’s Federalists, Jefferson joined forces with fellow Virginian James Madison in a quest to create an equally powerful political coalition that protected the interests of the yeoman farmer instead of the Northeastern elite. This new party, initially branded the Anti-Federalists, went to great lengths to combat their opponents, whom

²⁶ John Chester Miller, “The Federalist Era, 1789-1801,” *Nabu Public Domain Reprints* (2011): 210-228.

²⁷ Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815*, 55.

they denounced as patently anti-American. Jefferson and his followers employed various forms of propaganda, even publishing periodicals dedicated solely to the task of denouncing Federalists as enemies of republicanism. By the time Jefferson's party was rebranded as "Democratic-Republicans" in the late eighteenth century, the highly publicized political feud between Jefferson and Hamilton had given way to a full-on smear campaign between their respective parties, setting the stage for the emergence of extremist political factions in subsequent years.²⁸

The Essex Junto: Powerful Faction or Propaganda Apparatus?

It was in this tense environment that the true legacy of the Essex Junto materialized. In the late 1790s and early 1800s, New England Federalists were widely associated with elitism and secession. Naturally, the opponents of Federalism sought to capitalize on this association by stoking popular fear of the sinister yet amorphous Essex Junto throughout the nation. The term "Essex Junto," while technically based in fact, quickly evolved into a useful propaganda tool for the Jeffersonians, who sought to destroy the credibility of their political opponents through sensationalism and fear-mongering. Democratic-Republicans published incendiary articles in the partisan press accusing the Junto of plotting secession and trying to "sap the republic by fraud, if they cannot destroy it by force, & to erect an English monarchy in it's [sic] place."²⁹ These attacks proved to be successful, ultimately lessening Federalist support across the country due to their association with the "pro-Britain, antidemocratic" Essex Junto.³⁰

²⁸ Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815*, 55.

²⁹ *Boston Gazette*, 2 and 23 March 1789.

³⁰ Mayo-Bobee, "Understanding the Essex Junto," 630.

Prominent Federalists were fully aware of the implications of their association with the Junto. Fisher Ames, a founding member of the group, referenced this issue in an 1805 letter to Thomas Dwight: “Party is an association of honest men for honest purposes...But the Federalists are scarcely associated.”³¹ The topic also appeared in casual conversation, as Ames joked in an 1801 letter to a friend, “thank you for early asking my influence, which as a member of the Essex Junto, you know is great.”³² Other Federalists were much more forceful in their disavowal of the Junto, fighting back with accusations of libel against the Democratic-Republicans. They claimed that the Junto was a figment of Jefferson’s imagination, created for the express purpose of appealing to the public’s appetite for conspiracy and intrigue.³³

Contrary to Federalist objections, however, the rumors of treason in the press were not entirely unfounded. The individual actions of the men associated with the Junto served to perpetuate these fears; in fact, the group’s leader, Timothy Pickering, actually *was* the mastermind behind a plot for New England secession. As a former Secretary of State who had also served in both the House and the Senate, Pickering was of the opinion that the Three-Fifths Compromise put Massachusetts, “the most powerful” state in the union, at the low end of an unfair power imbalance.³⁴ He believed that if Massachusetts decided to secede, the rest of New England would follow suit along with the Mid-Atlantic region. The defecting states would then band together to form a Northeastern Confederacy free of slavery and the undue influence of the southern states.³⁵ Pickering’s plan did not ultimately come to fruition, but when word of his plot got out, rumors of treason among the Essex County Federalists were largely confirmed. From

³¹ Fisher Ames to Thomas Dwight, 15 August 1800.

³² Fisher Ames to Jeremiah Smith, 16 February 1801.

³³ Fischer, “The Myth of the Essex Junto,” p. 192

³⁴ Timothy Pickering to George Cabot, 29 January 1804.

³⁵ Kevin M. Gannon, “Escaping ‘Mr. Jefferson’s Plan of Destruction’: New England Federalists and the Idea of a Northern Confederacy, 1803–1804,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 21 (2001): 413–16.

then on, no arguments to the contrary would be able to dispel the widespread belief that the Junto was conspiring to tear the country apart.

The Pickering fiasco confirmed the Democratic-Republicans' notion that generating hysteria over secretive Federalist plots was a stunningly effective way to lessen support for their political enemies. It wasn't long before the Federalists were relegated to minority status in Congress and their power and legitimacy had significantly diminished. Federalists who remained in the legislature were constantly discredited, as any opposition to Jeffersonian legislation was sensationalized and traced back to the Essex Junto.

This pattern became especially prominent during the controversy surrounding Jefferson's Embargo in 1807. Legitimate concerns about the Embargo's effect on New England's economy were eclipsed by accusations that protesters in the North had purposefully violated the terms of the Embargo in an attempt to dismantle the Union.³⁶ The Democratic-Republicans were so skilled at disseminating propaganda that even the biggest misstep of Jefferson's presidency could be used to discredit the Federalist Party.

The War of 1812, the Hartford Convention, and Fall of the Federalists

Suspicious of a pro-British Federalist Junto were further confirmed in the minds of many Americans by the Federalists' staunch opposition to the War of 1812. Their vocal objections to war with Britain appeared to prove accusations of the Anglophilia and anti-Americanism of the Federalist Party, particularly the Essex Junto.³⁷ It was amid this controversy that a pamphlet

³⁶ Mayo-Bobee, "Understanding the Essex Junto," 638.

³⁷ Troy Bickham, *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812* (Oxford University Press, 2017): 258.

entitled *Essex Junto and the British Spy; or, Treason Detected* was published, claiming that members of the Junto were “bent on the subversion of civil liberty, to secure themselves crowns and titles of nobility, regardless of the consequences to severing the Union.”³⁸ This sentiment was shared by the majority of American citizens, who viewed Federalist objections to war with Britain as proof of the ever-present threat of disunion.

The fate of the Federalist Party was sealed with the adjournment of the Hartford Convention in January of 1815. This controversial event was attended by a delegation of prominent New England Federalists, among them Timothy Pickering, for the purpose of creating resolutions regarding the War of 1812 and discussing the possibility of New England secession. Although its influence was entirely negated by the fact that the war was technically over by the time the Hartford resolutions were delivered, the Hartford Convention confirmed what the Democratic-Republicans had been saying all along: that the Federalist Party was in league with the “treasonable practices of the Essex Junto.”³⁹ The Convention’s emphasis on New England secession was enough to permanently brand the Federalists as traitors and strip them of all credibility. America’s first political party disbanded after the War of 1812, never again to occupy a spot on the political stage. It was indisputably clear to both sides of the aisle, as it had been for decades, that the blame could be placed squarely on the shoulders of the radical Federalists from Essex County.

Conclusion

³⁸ John Henry, *The Essex Junto and the British Spy; or Treason Detected* (Salem: n.p., 1812): 2.

³⁹ William H. Crawford to Henry Clay, December 12, 1814.

In light of the controversy and conspiracy that plagued the Federalist Party from the outset, it is apparent their decline and eventual collapse can be largely traced back to a single notorious source: The Essex Junto. What began as an exclusive social circle in northeastern Massachusetts eventually evolved into nothing more than a political bogeyman and sensational propaganda tool. The Junto was, in actuality, neither merely a myth nor a clearly defined political player. Instead, it was a small group of modest national influence whose inherent divisiveness deemed it a perfect target for Jeffersonian propaganda. But the secessionist rhetoric of Timothy Pickering, combined with the aristocratic status and pro-Britain leanings of his contemporaries, were proof enough for the majority of the nation that these elite and powerful men actually were conspiring to divide the country.

Samuel Adams captured this sentiment in an impassioned speech before the Massachusetts legislature in 1781. He advised his peers to vote cautiously in order to frustrate the aristocratic agenda of a Junto whose goal was to “change the love of liberty into a spirit of faction.”⁴⁰ In the decades that followed, however, it became clear that the true threat to American democracy was not an amorphous and sensationalized Junto, but the political opportunists who propagated the hysteria surrounding them. In the end, the Essex Junto proved to be nothing more than a symptom of a broken political system, one where the threat of secession was ever-present and the use of propaganda and smear campaigns was the preferred method for political discourse. The true threat to American democracy was never a powerful and secretive Federalist hegemon from Essex; instead, it was the “spirit of faction” that they symbolized all along.

⁴⁰ Mayo-Bobee, “Understanding the Essex Junto,” 626.

About the author

Julia Brown is a junior studying history at George Washington University. Originally from South Kingstown, Rhode Island, she currently lives in Washington, D.C. where she is working as an intern for the Office of the Historian at the U.S. House of Representatives.

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