

The Boston Declaration of Grievances

Cotton Mather & Others ♦ April 18, 1689 (EXCERPTS)

[The Declaration of the Gentlemen, Merchants, and Inhabitants of Boston, and the Country Adjacent]

Crowned king of England in 1685, James II alienated many of his subjects at home and in the colonies with his belief in the divine right of kings and his Roman Catholic religion. He imposed stringent authority over the American colonies, including the consolidation of several northern colonies under the autocratic rule of a new governor, Sir Edmund Andros. Andros imposed new taxes, abolished colonial assemblies, and curtailed long-standing citizens' rights. In April 1689 when Boston colonists learned that King James had been deposed the previous November (in the Glorious Revolution of 1688), they stormed the fort of Boston and demanded the ouster of Andros. Anxious to avoid escalating mob violence, a group of elite Bostonians, including Cotton Mather, presented a declaration calling on Andros to step down from office. On the day of the uprising, the declaration (which exaggerates many of the grievances, scholars remind us) was read from the balcony of the Boston Town House and soon printed as a broadside.

I We have seen more than a decade of Years rolled away since the English World has the Discovery of an horrid Popish [Catholic] plot;¹ wherein the bloody Devotees of Rome had in their Design and Prospect no less than the Extinction of the Protestant Religion . . . And we were of all Men the most insensible, if we should apprehend a Country so remarkable for the true Profession and pure Exercise of the Protestant Religion as New-England is, wholly unconcerned in the Infamous Plot. . . .

II . . . Our charter was with a most injurious Pretense (and scarce that) of Law, condemned before it was possible for us to appear at Westminster [Parliament] in the legal Defense of it; and without a fair leave to answer for ourselves, concerning the Crimes falsely laid to our Charge, we were put under a President and Council without any liberty for an Assembly, which the other American Plantations [colonies] have, . . .

III The Commission was as Illegal for the Form of it as the Way of obtaining it was Malicious and Unreasonable: yet we made no Resistance thereunto as we could easily have done; but chose to give all Mankind a Demonstration of our being a People sufficiently dutiful and loyal to our King: . . .

IV In little more than half a Year we saw this Commission superseded by another yet more absolute and Arbitrary, with which Sir Edmond Andros arrived as our Governor; who besides his Power, with the Advice and Consent of his Council, to make Laws and raise Taxes as he pleased, had also Authority by himself to Muster and Employ all Persons residing in the Territory as occasion shall serve; and to transfer such Forces to any English Plantation [colony] in America as occasion shall require. . . .

V The Government was no sooner in these Hands, but Care was taken to load Preferments [government positions] principally upon such Men as were Strangers to and Haters of the People² . . . But of all our Oppressors we were chiefly squeez'd by a Crew of abject Persons



New York Public Library

Gov. Edmund Andros

Excerpted, images added, and spelling modernized by the National Humanities Center, 2006: www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm. In Charles M. Andrews, ed., *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675-1690* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), pp. 175-182. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

¹ The Titus Oates Plot of 1678. In England, the Protestant Titus Oates spread the rumor that Catholic Jesuit priests planned to assassinate King Charles II, a Protestant, and replace him with his Catholic brother James II (who later became king in 1685). [NHC note]

² . . . The charge here made is manifestly an exaggerated one; even on ordinary occasions Mather was not given to impartiality of statement, and this was no ordinary occasion. [Andrews, ed., *Narratives*, p. 177]

fetches from New York, to be the Tools of the Adversary, standing at our right Hand; by these were extraordinary and intolerable Fees extorted from everyone upon all Occasions, without any Rules but those of their own insatiable Avarice and Beggary; and even the probate of a Will must now cost as many Pounds perhaps as it did Shillings heretofore; nor could a small Volume contain the other Illegalities done by these Horse-leeches in the two or three Years that they have been sucking of us; . . .

VI

It was now plainly affirmed, both by some in open Council and by the same in private Convers[ation], that the People in New-England were all Slaves, and the only difference between them and Slaves is their not being bought and sold, and it was a Maxim delivered in open Court unto us by one of the Council that we must think the Privileges of English men would follow us to the End of the World;³ Accordingly we have been treated with multiplied Contradictions to [the] Magna Carta, the rights of which we laid claim unto. Persons who did but peaceably object against the raising of Taxes without an Assembly have been for it fined, some twenty, some thirty, and others fifty Pounds. Packed and picked Juries have been very common things among us when, under a pretended Form of Law, the Trouble of some honest and worthy men has been aimed at: . . . Without a Verdict, yes, without a Jury sometimes have People been fined most unrighteously; and some not of the meanest Quality have been kept in long and close imprisonment without any the least Information appearing against them, or an Habeas Corpus⁴ allowed unto them. . . .

VII

To plunge the poor People everywhere into deeper Incapacities, there was one very comprehensive abuse given to use; Multitudes of pious and sober men through the Land [Quakers] scrupled the Mode of Swearing on the Book, desiring that they might Swear with an uplifted Hand, agreeable to the ancient Custom of the Colony . . . they that had this Doubt were still put by from serving upon any Juries; and many of them were most unaccountably Fined and Imprisoned. . . .

VIII

Because these Things would not make us miserable fast enough, there was a notable Discovery made of we know not what flaw in all our Titles to our lands⁵; and tho, besides our purchase of them from the Natives, and besides our actual peaceable un-questioned Possession of them for near threescore Years. . . Yet we were every day told That no Man was owner of a Foot of Land in all the Colony. Accordingly, Writs of Intrusion began everywhere to be served on People, that after all their Sweat and their Cost upon their formerly purchased Lands, thought themselves Freeholders of what they had. And the governor caused the Lands pertaining to these and those particular Men to be measured out for his Creatures to take possession of; and the Right Owners, for pulling up the stakes, have passed through Molestations enough to tire all the Patience in the World. . . .

Memorial Hall Museum



Deed for land in Pacomtuck (Deerfield, MA) sold by an Indian to two English colonists, 1677

³ Reference is here made to Chief Justice Dudley's unfortunate remark, at the trial of Wise of Ipswich for refusal to pay taxes, "Mr. Wise, you have no more privileges left you, than not to be sold as slaves." As no general assembly could meet to vote the taxes, levies were imposed by the governor and council. Even town-meetings were forbidden, except for the purpose of choosing officials and collecting such rates as were determined on at the council meetings in Boston. [Andrews, p. 178]

⁴ *Habeas corpus* (Latin: "you should have the body"): In general, the legal doctrine of *habeas corpus* provides protection from unfair and arbitrary imprisonment by the government. An order of *habeas corpus* directs an imprisoned person (the "body") to be brought to open court to hear the criminal charges against him or her, and to be freed if the imprisonment is deemed unlawful. The English Parliament passed the Habeas Corpus Act in 1679; the right is embodied in the U.S. Constitution in Article I, Section 9. [NHC note]

⁵ In the matter of land titles the colonists had a very real grievance. From the point of view of English law, the Massachusetts titles were none too secure, and many of the men in office were land-greedy. There was danger of the imposition of quit-rents [rental payments for land], to which the colonists had a deep-seated antipathy (Channing, *History of the United States*, II, 184-185). [Andrews, p. 179]

IX

. . . We bore all these and many more such Things without making any attempt for any Relief; only Mr. [Cotton] Mather, purely of respect unto the Good of his Afflicted Country, undertook a Voyage into England; which when these Men suspected him to be preparing for, they used all manner of Craft and Rage, not only to interrupt his Voyage, but to ruin his Person too. . . .

X

. . . [W]e are again Briar'd in the Perplexities of another Indian War [King William's War]; how or why is a mystery too deep for us to unfold. And tho' 'tis judged that our Indian Enemies are not above 100 in number, yet an Arm of One thousand English [colonists] hath been raised for the Conquering of them; which Army of our poor Friends and Brethren now under Popish [Catholic] Commanders (for in the Army as well as in the Council, Papists are in Commission) has been under such a Conduct than not one Indian hath been killed, but more English are supposed to have died through sickness and hardship and the whole War hath been so managed that we cannot but suspect in it a Branch of the Plot to bring us low; . . .

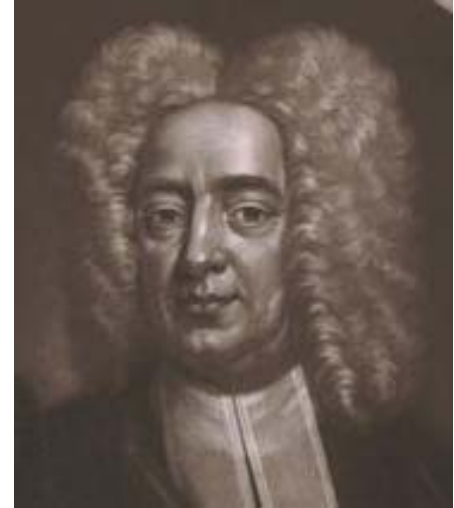
XI

We did nothing against these Proceedings but only cry to our God; they have caused the cry of the Poor to come unto him, and he hears the cry of the Afflicted. We have been quiet hitherto, and so still we should have been, had not the Great God at this time laid us under a double engagement to do something for our Security: besides what we have in the strangely unanimous Inclination which our Countrymen by extreme necessities are driven unto. For first, we are informed that the rest of the English America is alarmed with just and great Fears that they may be attacked by the French, who have lately ('tis said) already treated many of the English with worse than Turkish Cruelties; and while we are in equal Danger of being surprised by them, it is high time we should be better guarded than we are like to be while the Government remains in the hands by which it hath been held of late. . . .

XII

We do therefore seize upon the Persons of those few ill Men which have been (next to our Sins) the grand Authors of our Miseries; resolving to secure them for what Justice, Orders from his Highness with the English Parliament shall direct, lest, ere we are aware, we find (what we may fear, being on all sides in Danger) ourselves to be by them given away to a Foreign Power, before such Orders can reach unto us; for which Orders we now humbly wait. In the meantime, firmly believing that we have endeavored nothing but what mere Duty to God and our Country calls for at our Hands: We commit our Enterprise unto the Blessing of Him, who hears the cry of the Oppressed, and advise all our Neighbors, for whom we have thus ventured ourselves, to join with us in Prayers and all just Actions, for the Defense of the Land.

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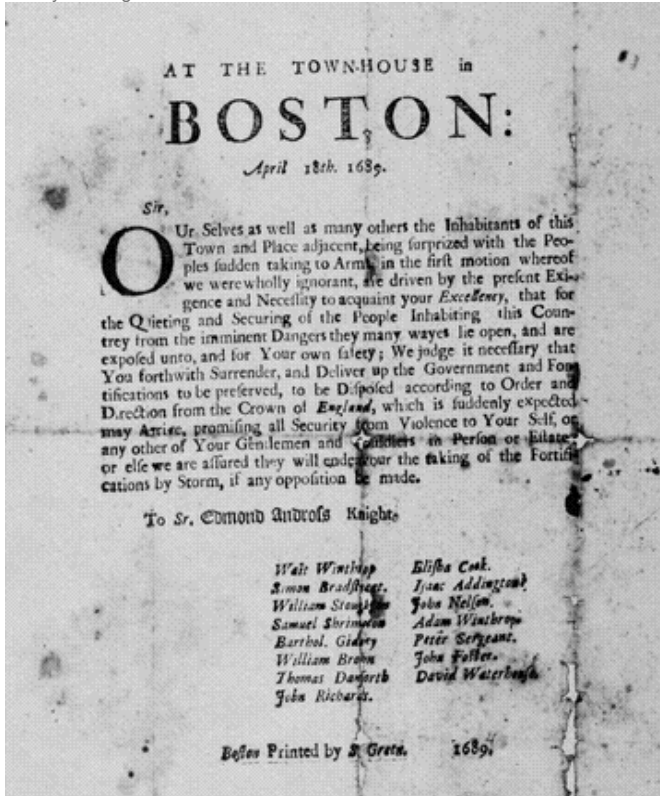


Cotton Mather, engraving publ. 1728, detail. Mather was a much younger twenty-six years old when he contributed to the Boston Declaration of Grievances.

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Herman Moll, *A new and exact map of the dominions of the King of Great Britain on y^e continent of North America*, 1731, detail



**AT THE TOWN-HOUSE IN
BOSTON:
April 18th. 1689.**

Sir [Gov. Andros],

Our Selves and many others the Inhabitants of this Town and the Place adjacent, being surprised with the Peoples sudden taking to Arms in the first motion whereof we were wholly ignorant, be driven by the present Exigence and Necessity to acquaint your *Excellency*, that for the Quieting and Securing of the People inhabiting this Countrey from the imminent Dangers they [in] many ways lie open and exposed unto, and for Your own Safety; We judge it necessary You forthwith Surrender, and deliver up the Government and Fortifications to be preserved, to be Disposed according to Order and Direction from the Crown of *England*, which is suddenly expected may Arrive; promising all Security from Violence to Your Self, or any of your Gentlemen and Soldiers in Person and Estate: or else we are assured they will endeavour the taking of the Fortifications by Storm, if any Opposition be made.

To Sr. **Edmond Andros** Knight.

<i>Wait Winthrop</i>	<i>Elisha Cook</i>
<i>Simon Bradstreet</i>	<i>Isaac Addington</i>
<i>William Stoughton</i>	<i>John Nelson</i>
<i>Samuel Shrimpton</i>	<i>Adam Winthrop</i>
<i>Barthol[omew] Gidney</i>	<i>Peter Sergeant</i>
<i>William Brown</i>	<i>John Foster</i>
<i>Thomas Danforth</i>	<i>David Waterhouse</i>
<i>John Richards</i>	

Boston Printed by S. Green. 1689.



Simon Bradstreet



John Foster