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Interview of Amy Watson

Amy Watson 00:00

These really foundational figures, people like George Washington and Alexander Hamilton that they're calling themselves patriots. So that was my big questions like, what does this mean? What does it mean to be a patriot? What does that label signify in the 18th century, and where does that come from in the first place? So yeah, as you mentioned, I argue that the original patriots were not Americans who were seeking independence. In fact, independence would have been very frightening to these early patriots, who were very pro-British Empire. They saw America and Britain as really intrinsically linked that they needed each other to become stronger.

Megan Kate Nelson 00:39

[Intro music fades in] *Historians and Their Histories* is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the paths they took to become a student of the past and the projects they are working on at the MHS. I am Megan Kate Nelson, a historian and writer living in Boston. I am guest hosting special episodes of Historians and Their Histories that discuss new books that former MHS research fellows have published. Today we are sitting down with Amy Watson, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Amy researches and writes about early modern Britain and its empire, the Atlantic world, the American Revolution and the history of print culture. Her book *Patriots Before Revolution: The Rise of Party Politics in the British Atlantic, 1714 to 1763* was published by Yale University Press this past summer, in June 2025. So welcome to *Historians and Their Histories*, Amy, and congratulations on the publication of your book.

Amy Watson 01:47

Thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me here. I'm so excited to talk about the book and to talk about how great the Massachusetts Historical Society was to me in the middle of covid during 2020 when I was lucky enough to be a researcher there.

Megan Kate Nelson 02:01

Right. Yes, so we definitely are going to talk about that, but first we're going to go back way to the beginning and ask you, why did you become a historian?

Amy Watson 02:13

I took my first international trip to the UK when I was 12 years old, and I became a little bit obsessed being in a place with so much history was really eye opening to me. I remember someone casually remarking that a pub that we were eating in was older than my country, and that really kind of stuck in my brain. So, my first teachers were certainly they were my parents. They were the ones who took me on that first trip. Just as a fun project, my mom actually started to write a children's history of Great Britain in order to get my brother and me excited about this trip. She's definitely a huge influence. She was more kind of geared towards the medieval period. So, I learned a lot about kings and queens and strong female leaders, people like Eleanor of Aquitaine and Boudica. So, if you didn't have to learn Latin, maybe I would have become a medievalist. I don't know, but it goes pretty far back. I then went to school, to university at Yale, and my professors there really guided me into the early modern period. Keith Wrightson was a huge influence. He encouraged me to think about the experiences of ordinary people, and not just kings and queens. Joanne Freeman was there, and she really started me on a path towards revolutionary America, and looking at politics in particular. And then Steve Pincus is now at UChicago but was at Yale at the time. He ended up being my supervisor, and he was really the person who kind of encouraged me to think big and to ask big questions about the past, questions as big as why did American Revolution happen and how did British politics influence American Revolutionary ideas. So that really convinced me that history could be a really important discipline to ask big questions, questions that are relevant to the here and now. And basically, I just kind of never looked back. I went and got a master's degree in Cambridge and then came back to Yale to get my PhD. And I've have been thrilled with that path. It's been always a lot of fun.

Megan Kate Nelson 04:22

That's so great. I love that and I also, as a young child, went traveling with my parents, and that was that kind of first touch with history.

Amy Watson 04:31

I think travel is, I mean, for a lot of people I've talked to, that's kind of what gets them into it and see that in person is really, really special. And I was in Scotland for a lot of research, and it's really just kind of amazing to look at a document in the archive and go out to the streets of Edinburgh and see the gravestone of the person you were just looking at, or seeing the place where somebody was murdered that happened with the Porteous crisis, which was literally down the road from the archive. So, I think that's a pretty special thing to do.

Megan Kate Nelson 05:00

Oh yeah, absolutely. And it really just, it gives the past that texture that we know that it has, you know, but so often doesn't appear in history books. You know, we don't get that kind of real material reality of the past. But visiting kind of does that, and travel does that. So that's fantastic. So, you've already mentioned a couple of teachers who really shaped your path. Were there any books or authors, other sources, or individuals who kind of helped you cultivate your interest in history, and in particular, these sort of big questions you're talking about, where for the American Revolution?

Amy Watson 05:42

Yeah, I mean, just a little small, insignificant question like that. There been a lot of people as I there, so I kind of like, so I sometimes gear more towards some of that kind of, I don't know foundational intellectual history on the American Revolution. I've read Bernard Bailyn *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* in graduate school. And I definitely see this book as building upon that quite a lot, maybe a little bit more focused on the organizational side of things and not just the ideas, although the ideas are very important as well. Jack Greene kind of in a similar vein, looking at that kind of intellectual origins and how these two places are connected. So I do find myself time sometimes, kind of like the really work, like classical and classic intellectual histories have been really important to shaping the way that I view history because I think some of those older traditions tackle bigger questions, to be honest, and sometimes are focused on looking at what's happening in Britain and how that influences what is happening in America and vice versa. I think local histories are great too, obviously, but I do think that sometimes, if you look a generation or two back, some of those historians are willing to think big, and that's what I hope I'm doing in this book as well.

Megan Kate Nelson 07:00

That's fantastic. And I'm sure you know research like this in the time period that you're investigating and the locations you're going to do that research provides some challenges for you as a historian, and maybe even teaching some of this material may provide some challenges now too. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Amy Watson 07:21

Obviously, travel is a big one. I have a toddler right now, so trying to figure out a way to get away sometimes and be actually be able to go into the archives for long stretches of time. I think that that is always going to be a challenge. And during covid, a lot of this was shut down. So that was a huge problem then as well. I guess one big challenge for me as a transatlantic historian, in particular, I always have a lot of historiographical ground to cover. In some ways that's very exciting, because if I get bored of something, I can just switch focus and learn about the Scottish Jacobites or indigenous Americans in the southeast, or the founding of the colony of Georgia. So, I get to move around a lot, but in other ways, that can be quite intimidating. I remember deciding that I wanted to focus one of my book chapters on New York and then realizing that there were literally dozens of books that I actually needed to read in order to get up to speed. I mean, who were the Morrisites? What role did the Dutch play in New York politics? That was something I was totally unaware of. Why were the Albany merchants and the New York City merchants always fighting each other? It's a lot to grasp in a short period of time. So that's a challenge of doing this kind of big transatlantic kind of history, and I definitely, just to be clear, still miss things a lot. When I submitted an article to a journal a few years ago, one of my reviewers was confused as to why I hadn't mentioned a certain eminent historian in my footnotes. The reviewer thought that I was excluding them in order to make a point. I promise I was not. I was just ignorant, and I didn't know that I was supposed to cite them. So, it can be a challenge to do that kind of big transatlantic history, and that way just more kind of nuts-and-bolts things. Sometimes it can be very challenging to read 18th century scripts. So, the first time you show up into an archive and have to decipher handwriting that is really indecipherable, that can be very frustrating. You need to give yourself some grace and some time for that. But I would still definitely encourage anyone who's starting off on this path, a graduate student, to keep trying to ask big questions. Make sure that you're doing something that you find exciting and relevant. It really never gets boring. And you can get up to speed. You can learn these things. So, I would provide encouragement in that direction.

Megan Kate Nelson 09:49

Yeah, that's great, because it really does whenever it's super challenging, that is always the fun in it, too, the kind of going into new fields and saying....

Amy Watson 09:59

Yeah, you learn things every day. I wouldn't want to do the same thing over and over again.

Megan Kate Nelson 10:04

Exactly. Yeah, this is why we got into this business, right to learn new things, because we're all functionally big nerds who just want to stay in school forever.

Amy Watson 10:13

That's pretty much that's my goal, and I, so far, I've achieved it, hopefully knock on wood.

Megan Kate Nelson 10:18

So, let's talk about this great book that you have written *Patriots Before Revolution*, which is out now with Yale University Press in both hardcover and paperback, which is great. So, in it, you make some arguments that I think will surprise have surprised many Americans, especially perhaps residents of states like New York and Georgia, who are going to learn something a little new about their own history. One of those major arguments is that American Revolutionary patriots, the people we have been and will be celebrating all through this America 250, seven-year long span that we've just entered now, we're not, in fact, uniquely American organization. So, could you talk a little bit more about that kind of central argument and how you hit upon that in your research?

Amy Watson 11:14

Yeah, I mean the question I'm starting off this project with every school children, child, as we know, with the 250th anniversary, they learned that these really foundational figures, people like George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, that they're calling themselves patriots. So that was my big question, like, what does this mean? What does it mean to be a patriot? What does that label signify in the 18th century, and where does that come from in the first place? So yeah, as you mentioned, I argue

that the original patriots were not Americans who were seeking independence. In fact, independence would have been very frightening to these early patriots, who were very pro-British Empire. They saw America and Britain is really intrinsically linked, that they needed each other to become stronger. But these patriots started off as a group of radical British politicians, and they wanted to reform the British Empire. In particular, they wanted to create an empire that was militant, expansionist, confederal and free. And I'd be happy to get into any of those four elements, if there's any interest in that, but kind of as like a general thing, they wanted to expand Atlantic trade. They wanted to bolster Atlantic industry. Oftentimes, they wanted to start wars to do these things. That was a big part of this too. And they wanted to protect certain civil liberties of Britain's Atlantic subjects. I do argue that this starts off as a reformist, radical British movement, but it's a movement that is quite successful in America. The American colonies really embraced this patriot program of imperial reform. Made a lot of sense to them. A lot of it was focused on kind of improving their interests and their economy. But around the 1760s or so, Britain began to kind of turn away against these patriot ideas. So, I argue that that really was what set up this political conflict of revolutionary consequence. However, in the beginning, that was not the goal revolution, independence, not something that these early patriots were thinking about at all.

Megan Kate Nelson 13:23
It's such a good argument, and it's such an anti-intuitive argument for most Americans, even historians like me, you know, because I study a later time period. But we, you know, we all have this image in our brains that these, you know, these patriots are homegrown.

Amy Watson 13:38
When I think a lot of my students at least, also assumed that the American Revolution was sort of inevitable eventually, that this was obviously going to happen, that these two places were just so different. So, I think that's an important thing to remember, too, that there was a lot of there were a lot of people in Britain who agreed with what the American colonists were arguing, and vice versa. I just sometimes argue that there was a bit of a civil war happening during this period, rather than just a colony, group of colonies against the mother country. It's a little more complicated than that.

Megan Kate Nelson 14:09

Yeah, it's such a good reframing. And what I also appreciate about the book is that you make a series of points about how this party came to be. And I think that's, you know, of interest to us right now, as we're kind of in the middle of what I think people might call a kind of political party crisis. Where everyone's like, what are these parties? What are we even doing? Kind of, what do we stand for, kind of in this moment, and how do we make things happen? And throughout the book, you're talking about how in these different time periods and in response to different kind of push and pull factors, you know, the patriots are developing leadership. They are creating a pretty coherent party platform. They have active members with economic and social power, which is hugely important. They also have a willingness to use popular protest as a check on government power, which is something that I think readers will recognize as an American patriot strategy also. And they controlled an extensive network of newspapers. This was really interesting to me, because I, you know, I really like kind of thinking about print culture and material culture, and how political organizations and groups use both of those things to kind of reach out to people and create community. So could you talk a little bit more about and some of them have, you know also great titles or great names these newspapers that you have found. So, could you talk a bit about why newspapers played such an important role, and kind of how that connected then to this growing conviction that the press needed to be free?

Amy Watson 15:58

I love talking about print culture, so I'm glad to find another print culture nerd here. I think it's very exciting during this time period where it's really exploding, especially. As you mentioned, I argue in the book that print culture, but newspapers in particular, were really responsible for the patriot's political success. I think I actually say at some point that newspapers was what made the patriots a successful political party like it wouldn't have been really a party without the newspapers. And to me, newspapers were important for a couple of different reasons. First, patriot newspapers helped to spread these new patriot ideas across space and across really big geographies. So, in the 18th century, American newspapers did not usually come up with a lot of their own original content. Sometimes, almost all of their content was material that was recycled basically from London newspapers at this time. So, these London patriot newspapers that I talk about things like *The Craftsman* and *Common Sense*, which, by the way of I think Thomas Paine probably took that name from this earlier patriot newspaper.

Megan Kate Nelson 17:03

I was wondering if that was the case.

Amy Watson 17:05

I wouldn't, I haven't found evidence of that, but, I mean, it was a very popular newspaper that he would have been reading at the time. So that would make sense, at least to me. That seems like common sense. They had a really wide geographic reach. I mean, people in London read them, people and the rest of Britain read them, whether that was in their original form or recycled in more local newspapers than Americans in places like New York and Boston. They were regular reading these British patriot ideas about things like constitutional liberty and taxation. And they were saying, 'Hey, that makes sense to me. That resonates.' So, newspapers, to me, are really the mechanism for kind of incorporating these very far-flung British peoples into this patriot partisan apparatus. But second, and I think that this point sometimes gets kind of overlooked, newspapers actually help to coordinate political action during this time period. The newspapers were telling voters what bills were being discussed in parliament, which was kind of a new thing in the 18th century. It was telling them often why these bills were bad and shouldn't be passed, and what ordinary Britons could do in order to protest these bills. So, newspapers were really responsible for the instruction campaigns in which ordinary people across Britain were writing to their representatives and telling them, please do not vote for this bill. Often, newspapers publish these instructions that citizens in a place like Plymouth or Bristol would send in, and then that gave other cities a template to follow for their instruction campaigns. So, kind of it was this bit of a cycle. Newspapers also helped to organize parades and demonstrations. They then described these parades and demonstrations at great length so that other cities again, could copy that and follow suit. So, newspapers certainly communicated ideas. But that was not all that they did. They really made widespread public participation and the political process possible. And the patriots, I'd argue, were one of the first British parties who really recognized the power that newspapers had, and they exploited it for their own interest. It was one of the reasons why they managed to gain so much popular support in such a short period of time. And in terms of these kind of free speech free press arguments, you can understand if newspapers were so important to the patriots, why it was really important to them to make sure that newspapers did remain uncensored and that they didn't have to worry about getting thrown into prison every time they wrote an article that was criticizing Robert Walpole. And then these arguments again get picked up in places like New York, which are having very similar debates about free speech.

And the power of the government to censor people. So yeah, these are kind of self-reinforcing trends during this period.

Megan Kate Nelson 20:06
So, do you see 18th century newspapers as kind of the precursor to social media in today's world?

Amy Watson 20:15
There are certainly some parallels. I think that sometimes it's could be like social media, sometimes it could be like a news broadcaster like Fox News obviously has had a lot of political power within our modern political system. Oftentimes, these organizations are controlled by political leaders who have very close ties to a particular party, and that was true in the 18th century as well. The leaders in the organizers of the craftsmen were William Pulteney and Lord [Henry St. John, 1st Viscount] Bolingbroke, who were basically the heads of the patriot party and the heads of the Tory party at that time. That's who funded this. That's who kind of was organizing that. So, it oftentimes is kind of a mouthpiece for a particular partisan position. And I think there are some similarities between something like Fox News today. Probably social media as well, although social media, I think, sometimes can get out of the hands of the people who are controlling it. And that, it's unclear to me exactly where that is leading, but certainly it is creating a more kind of democratic way that people can engage in the political process, and that would probably be a similarity as well.

Megan Kate Nelson 21:27
So how did you come up with the idea for this book? I mean, you talked about how you kind of started off with this question of, where did the patriots come from, but, but what led you to that question?

Amy Watson 21:41
Basically, I came to the idea partly because I already knew that I wanted to write something about transatlantic politics. Atlantic history was all the rage when I was in graduate school, but I noticed that not too many of these Atlantic historians were working on politics or partisanship. I think it was kind of perceived as somewhat fusty or old fashioned at that time. I do think that's perhaps changing a little bit with our modern situation. We recognize parties can have a huge impact on ordinary people's lives, so perhaps the historiographical focus is shifting a little bit. In my first year of graduate school, I was doing

some reading for a class on early modern British politics, and I realized something that I found kind of strange, kind of interesting. In the 1720s, and '30s, the opposition to Robert Walpole, Britain's first prime minister, they called themselves 'patriots.' I was simultaneously taking a class on the American Revolution, and so I began to wonder if these early British patriots had anything to do with the later American patriots because that's a very specific term to be using, and the more I dove into it, the stronger the similarity seemed. Both groups of patriots were obsessed with taxes. Both groups of patriots focused a lot on constitutional liberties, habeas corpus, free speech, which we already talked about a bit, trial by jury. Both groups, as we already I already mentioned, were really good engaging ordinary people in the political process through those newspapers, but also through petitions and demonstrations and even riots. So, they recognized that the public could be a powerful alternative source of authority. After years of research, I became convinced that there was a book there, and a decade later, here we are.

Megan Kate Nelson 23:44
I like that. And then a mere 10 years later,

Amy Watson 23:46
It takes a while, just so everyone out there is aware it takes a while to write a book, at least it did for me. Maybe some people not so much.

Megan Kate Nelson 23:54
Yes, yeah, there's a lot of hard work. There's a lot of kind of going through sources that you may or may not use. You know, doing the hard work of bringing all of that together for such, you know, a book that tackles such a number of large questions like yours does. So, what was the I mean, although your question and your scope, it's pretty big. You do talk about, you know, a bunch of different really fascinating people and a lot of really engaging and interesting events. So, what was your favorite kind of event or person or kind of scene in the book to write about?

Amy Watson 24:35
Oh, that's a good question. Definitely the Georgia chapter I found really fun to do, and that's probably partly because I'm originally from Alabama, and I now teach at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. I guess we would have technically been part of that territory that Georgia claimed, even

though no one actually kind of thought that that was actually true. So that was interesting to me and also kind of the utopian scope of the Georgia project, the idea that a lot of these Patriot founders really thought that if they put their ideas into practice, they could create a perfect colony, a colony that really had no problems, where all the colonists were perfectly behaved. They had their rights protected. They were making lots of money for the British Empire. They were simultaneously protecting the British Empire from the threats of Spanish America. And all of these hopes and dreams got quashed very, very quickly. So it's an interesting kind of 10 year period where they have one clear idea of what they want this colony to be, and then 10 years later, it's already looking very clearly like it's going to be a plantation style economy based on enslaved labor, which was exactly the opposite of what those early patriots had dreamed of. So, in some ways, it's a very sad story, I guess, but it's also interesting that Georgia could have gone the American south in general could have gone such a different direction if some of these ideas had actually worked out. So yeah, I'd say that was probably the most fun chapter to write for me. James Oglethorpe, I see his statue sometimes when I'm traveling to Georgia and I'm like, oh yeah, he maybe we don't have to tear his statue down quite yet, like some other ones.

Megan Kate Nelson 26:21
Yeah. He had some decent ideas.

Amy Watson 26:23
Yeah. He was also, to be clear, I mean, every historical figure, you don't want to meet your historical figures too closely because they've all got some things going on. But he did not think that ordinary people really had the intelligence to be making their own laws until sometime in the future. So, he liked to kind of benevolently use this kind of paternalistic policy to running things. So that's definitely a disadvantage to James Oglethorpe.

Megan Kate Nelson 26:48
But it does I mean the story of Georgia in that chapter really goes toward that argument that nothing's inevitable that you were talking about earlier, right? That Georgia did not begin as a colony dedicated to enslavement or rooted in enslavement, and it could have gone another way. There could have been a different decision, and the trajectory would have changed.

Amy Watson 27:11

I tell my students a lot, when we look at slavery, that slavery is a political choice, and I think Georgia is a really good example of that. That was not the only option that colonists had available to them. It was just the option that made some of them a lot of money. So that's what they chose to do. But that wasn't the only thing they could have done.

Megan Kate Nelson 27:27

You know, you mentioned at the beginning that you were excited to talk about all of the great sources that you found at the Massachusetts Historical Society. So, let's talk about those. So, what sources did you use?

Amy Watson 27:39

I had, like I mentioned at the beginning, I had a NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] fellowship at the MHS right in the middle of covid in 2020, so it was kind of an interesting time to be in an archive. Everyone was isolating from each other and wearing masks and all these interesting things. But when I was there, I was really focusing on a book chapter, I mean, a section of a book chapter in particular that focused on the siege of Louisbourg in 1745. This was a French controlled Atlantic port, which is in present day Nova Scotia. And the entire expedition to conquer this port was organized, funded and led by New England Patriots, and I argue in this part of the chapter that it encouraged New England Patriots to begin seeing their interests as maybe somewhat different than Great Britain's interests, which was a divide that would obviously play into the revolutionary crisis of the decades to come. So, while I was at the MHS, I focused a lot of my research on the William Shirley papers. He was a governor of Massachusetts at this time. William Pepperrell's papers, he was the military leader of the expedition. I also looked at the journals of some of the participants in the siege, such as William Clark, who was the expedition's doctor. And through these collections, I found some really important points that I like that I talked about a lot in the book. First, I discovered that there were some really deep tensions between British naval forces and New England land forces during this campaign. It was supposed to be a joint effort, but they did not always cooperate particularly well, and this infighting might seem kind of petty, but it really reflected a long-standing notion that British officials did not really value New England and its contributions to British imperial prosperity or security. So, you can already see, like the some seeds of division there and then the Whig ministry's decision to actually return

Louisbourg to France in the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, that really heightened the sense that Britain did not really care that much about New England. This expedition in which New England funded it, they a lot of them lost their lives. Britain was just kind of like, 'Oh gosh, this is not something we actually want you to be doing.' So yeah, that's you can begin to see there's a little bit of a difference there. Second that the research I did at the MHS really helped me to learn a lot about what is, quite frankly, a pretty shameful thread of British patriot foreign policy in the North Atlantic, which was the expulsion of the French Acadians. Through the MHS collections, I learned that this expulsion, though it, did not really begin in full force until the 1750s it was really an explicit goal of that 1745 patriot campaign. For example, there was this great ballad that I found at the MHS that openly celebrated the removal of the French inhabitants of Louisbourg and even officials like Governor Shirley, who were publicly proclaiming that removal was not going to happen, privately, he was already beginning to make plans for the removal a decade before it actually happened. So, I guess that research on the Acadian removal really helped me to complicate the picture. I think sometimes Americans think of the patriots as kind of the good guys in this and certainly there were some really, I think good ideas the patriots had protection of habeas corpus and free speech. I mean, what can, what can you not say about the that that is good, but also, it's a reminder that British imperial conquest, like Louisbourg, had really human victims and not just victors. So, I think that's something important that I wanted to put in the book that the British patriots, it's a little bit more of a complicated picture than we Americans might initially think.

Megan Kate Nelson 31:44
So, when you were doing research at MHS, were there any kind of those coveted, dreamed of eureka moments or, like a where you had some sort of serendipitous find that was super unexpected?

Amy Watson 31:58
Yeah, I mentioned this just like very briefly, but probably my favorite thing that I found at the MHS was a ballad that celebrated New England's success and the siege of Louisbourg. Ballads are great because I think that ballads actually give you some insight into what ordinary people were thinking about a particular conflict at a time. It's not just, you know, the politicians and the governors, but ordinary shopkeepers and artisans and laborers oftentimes buy those ballads and then seeing those ballads. So, I get very excited when I find little aspects of print culture like that. And this ballad, it was called, 'New England Bravery.' And basically it's just this massive celebration and song for capturing this French

Canadian port, and within this ballad, you can see how there's a lot of real anger and hatred that ordinary New Englanders held towards these French Canadians. There are some kind of like light hearted jokes that make fun of the French, just as British people and French people make fun of each other today, but there's also a passage at the end that really stuck out to me. It says, 'They are all sent to France with all the islanders, which needs must ease, our countrymen of many cares and fears.' So, you got this ballad where the people of Boston are anticipating this Acadian expulsion, which happened a decade later in the 1750s and they're not just anticipating it, they're really celebrating it. They want the French gone. They do not seem to care about whose lives they destroy in order to do that. They think this is great. It's going to ease them of all their cares and fears. And it's important maybe, to recognize that there were some fears there that this port is quite close by travel on ship to Boston, so maybe they were worried about that in a future conflict. But as I've said already, to me, this ballad is a good reminder that this Patriot victory is not a case of the good patriots versus the evil Tories or the evil French. There's a lot of expansionism within this patriot project, and it's interesting to see these ordinary Boston civilians who are caught up into that spirit of that militant expansionism as well.

Megan Kate Nelson 34:15

So, you had you mentioned before that you were doing a lot of this research during covid, and this, of course, was a huge challenge for the MHS. I mean, it was a challenge for everybody living at the time of the pandemic. But the, you know, the MHS, I was on the research committee at that time, and we're everyone was just trying to figure out, like, how are we going to help researchers? How are we going to, you know, for people who had already been awarded fellowships, how are we going to make this happen for them? How are we going to deal with people coming back into the reading room and making sure that everyone feels safe, both kind of staff and researchers? So that was obviously a very unusual time and thankfully out of the ordinary for us, most of the time in the archive. Do you have any advice for young scholars who are, you know, coming up, and they're looking at doing this dissertation research in a number of different archives, probably under a bunch of different conditions now, because I think covid has really changed the way that many archives kind of do their work, and do you have advice for them about kind of how to go to an archive and how best to kind of use that time?

Amy Watson 35:30

That's a great question. And by the way, thank you so much for the MHS did a really great job of making that work for us. I had thought that maybe I wasn't going to be able to be in an archive at all that year, and that was a really nice break from the crazy world that was happening in the fall of 2020. Yeah, hopefully scholars today aren't facing quite as dramatic a sort of problem for the archive. But archival research is always hard. I guess that's the big advice that I oftentimes give my students, at least. I'm teaching a class like a research seminar right now with senior history majors, and one of the big tips that I give my students is that archival research takes a lot more time than they think that it's going to. So just, I guess, an example for me, when I'm an average day in the archives, I might read say 40 letters, but only two of those letters might actually contain information that I find useful for the book, and only one of those letters might actually make it into a footnote of an article or a book chapter. So, my number one tip is basically just give yourself a lot of time, if you can, sometimes that's hard, but the more time, the better. And try not to get frustrated when you don't find exactly what you hope to find right away. That's part of the deal with archival research. It takes a lot of time. Another tip that my one of my mentors, Steve Pincus, gave to me was to make sure that you give yourself a little bit of time every day, maybe an hour or two, to pursue what he called 'high risk high reward documents.' So, if something looks interesting in a catalog, but there's not a lot of information about it, it might not be relevant, but, you know, call it up anyway, if you have the time. Most of the time, you're probably not going to find anything, but sometimes, when I've done that, you really do find that real gem that has not been studied very much because that catalog record is very sparse. So, you know, there's certain things, you know, they're going to be useful to you based on the description. But every once in a while, try to call up something that is just interesting and see what happens. Kind of like a treasure hunt. You never really know exactly what you're going to get. Finally, and this is maybe kind of obvious, but I think it's really important to use archivists. They know the collections the best. That's their job. And I know a lot of my students find it really scary to email an archivist or set up a Zoom meeting to talk to them about your research. But it is always worth it, especially when I was at the MHS or when I was at The Huntington I'm very good friends with Vanessa Wilkie there, and she's been so incredibly helpful to me with my research, and is always telling me, 'Hey, you need to check out this collection. It just came in.' So, archivists are amazing. They are there to help. So, use them, and that means actually having sometimes to talk to them.

Megan Kate Nelson 38:26

What is your strategy usually? Do you go in with a prioritized list of things that you want to look at with little kind of breaks for what you were just talking about, the sort of 'high risk, high reward'?

Amy Watson 38:37

Yeah, generally, I've had kind of a kind of a ranked list based on here, the things I know look like are obviously going to be useful to me, and sometimes those actually aren't quite as useful as you think they're going to be. So, you have to kind of have backup plans. Here's what I can look at instead. I was really lucky in graduate school. I got to spend an entire year in London, and so I didn't have to be quite as formulaic about it. I was able to just kind of call things up and sometimes explore paths and see what saw, what I saw in one document, and use that to kind of find something else. But I know that is not practically feasible for a lot of people, so sometimes just doing a lot of the prep work ahead of time, I think can be very helpful. Have that ranked list. Talk to the archivist ahead of time. Make sure that you have enough time to get to see what you want to see. And I sometimes using like, I don't love to do this, but if you can taking photos of things to look at later can mean that you can actually get through a lot of material in a short period of time.

Megan Kate Nelson 39:37

My last question for you here today is how do you think the book *Patriots Before Revolution* will help Americans kind of better understand, not only the origins of the American Revolution, like in this moment, where we're celebrating the 250th anniversary of it, but also kind of understand where we are today in terms of political parties and their evolution and the emergence of these and I appreciate that in your book, you call these parties, like the patriot party, breakaway parties, that I mean, they're kind of third parties, but they're but I like the breakaway party idea because it seems a little more specific, that it does have roots in us, in a you know, party that already exists, but people are kind of breaking away. So, what do you think the book can kind of tell us about the Revolution itself and then this moment now?

Amy Watson 40:31

First, I think that the American Revolution really shows its readers that the American Revolution had extremely deep roots. Most histories of the Revolution do not really start until at least 1763, which is where my book ends. The end of the Seven Years War. But as I hope the book shows, the first half of

the 18th century is very important. It's often kind of treated as sort of boring this period of stability or salutary neglect, but I promise it was not boring in the least. It was actually an era of extreme political upheaval. I argue that it was really kind of in this period that the British Empire saw the rise of a form of politics that was not exactly democratic, but it was at least democratizing. It was a period in which the political role of ordinary people expanded very dramatically, and it was a period in which Britons and Americans fought really fiercely over the politics of taxes and civil liberties and war and Empire. So basically, the Revolution did not come out of nowhere in the 1760s, and '70s. Its origin story is really a long one. So, if people get that, that would be a great thing for them to get out of this book. Second, I think this book is important because it explains the British political context in which this Revolution emerged. Histories of the American Revolution tend to treat the British state as one single entity that was really kind of unified in its strategies of imperial rule, but that framing completely ignores the importance of British partisan divisions. Here's one modern parallel that I have used before, since you asked about the modern kind of the modern context of this. It would be really wrong to assume that the [George W.] Bush administration pursued exactly the same foreign policy as the [Barack] Obama administration, or now today with the [Donald] Trump administration. Obviously, they have very different goals in mind. So why do historians so often assume that the Newcastle-Pitt ministry, which was a Whig and Patriot coalition, shared exactly the same foreign policy goals as the [George] Grenville Ministry or the [Frederick] North Ministry which were authoritarian reformer ministries. So, partisanship matters. That's a big thing that I hope people get out of this book. It's no coincidence that the American Revolutionaries used a partisan language in their labels. They called themselves 'Patriots.' They called their opponents 'Tories.' Partisanship dramatically shaped the course of British and American politics in the 18th century, just as it does today. So, partisanship can really change things very quickly. We need to be aware of that. We need to be aware that elections matter, and these things can be fluid, and political change can happen very, very quickly. And that was true in the 18th century, and it's also true today. So, I guess that's what I hope audiences and readers take out of the book. That was my goal at least.

Megan Kate Nelson 43:47

Well, that's a great note to end on. Thank you so much Amy for being with us today for *Historians and Their Histories.*

Amy Watson 43:55

Thank you so much for having me. It was really fun to chat about my book. I very much appreciate it.

Megan Kate Nelson 44:00

[Outro music fades in] *Historians and Their Histories* is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the NHS. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening, and please rate, review, and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.