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Interview of Boone Ayala

Boone Ayala 00:00

The project that I'm working on here at the MHS is an article about the fall of the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1684 when it finally loses its charter in the Court of Chancery to a writ of scire facias. And what I'm trying to do in this article is to situate the controversy over the Massachusetts charter in the context of the contemporaneous assault on municipal corporations in England.

Samuel Hurwitz 00:24

[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 that they took to become a student of the past and the projects they're working on at the MHS. I'm Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer and Editor at the research department at the MHS. Today, we are sitting down with Boone Ayala, a PhD candidate in the history department at the University of Chicago, and a recipient of the W.B.H. Dowse Fellowship from the MHS. So, thank you very much for being here, Boone. Can you just tell us a little bit about yourself and where you're coming from and your research topics?

Boone Ayala 01:12

Thank you for having me. Yeah, it would be my pleasure. I'm a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago. I study corporate law in early modern England and its empire in late 17th century England and its empire. So I take a sort of holistic view of the English empire in the late 1600s mainly the reign of Charles the second from 1660 to 1685 and I look at the use of corporations as institutions of government, both in England and across the empire, and show the ways in which politics and law about corporations in general is evolving and is shaping both domestic policy and sort of imperial policy in this period.

Samuel Hurwitz 01:55

Can you tell us why you became a historian? Were there certain influences growing up where you grew up, teachers, books, anything like that, that really pushed you down this road of becoming a historian?

Boone Ayala 02:09

Absolutely. I mean, to some extent, my research interests are sort of inherited. My mother is a paralegal. My father is a high school history teacher. So, my research interests in, you know, the history of law are sort of a synthesis of things that I grew up learning a lot about. I originally went to college as a computer science major and didn't quite take to it in the way that I thought I would and ended up filling up a lot of my schedule with spare history classes. And so midway through my junior year of college, after having taken a couple of history classes and after and amidst the sort of public excitement over Hamilton, actually, I figured, you know, it would make sense to actually do the thing that I was interested in and was spending all of my free time doing, and to make that the focus of my college career, but in terms of the specifics of the research interests, I initially started out interested in the history of the US Federal Constitution, and so I took a lot of classes on the American Revolution, on Independence, and then I took a class with Professor Eric Slaughter at the University of Chicago in the English Department on the Declaration of Independence, and it was a really cool class because it brought us into the university's Special Collections room, and it was the first time that I was ever handling archival documents. But the class opened not with the relatively more familiar text to me of the late 18th century American colonies, but it began with the English Bill of Rights from 1689, and I was I was captivated by how much of what I thought was unique to the American Revolutionary moment seemed to have this 17th century English antecedent. So, through that document and through that class, I sort of got pulled backwards into the 17th century and into being more of an imperial historian than just a historian of the colonies. And to some extent, I've never looked back. My bachelor's thesis was on the Massachusetts Charter of 1691, and I'm still writing about charters eight years later.

Samuel Hurwitz 04:19

When you were in middle school and high school were you reading history, or were you doing more of the STEM activities because you said you started off as a computer science major?

Boone Ayala 04:29

I was reading history. I've always been fascinated by, like, storytelling. And so even when I was a computer science major, what I wanted to do was actually make video games, because I was interested in the sort of narrative potential there. And so, growing up, I always, I always enjoyed history. I always enjoyed history classes. You know, it's, I think that I read the sort of like, you know, popular children's

books that are, you know, historically inclined. You know, things like *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, and things like that. I didn't start thinking about history as a as a potential career path for me until college, when, you know, in the course of taking these classes, I read, you know, a number of works like, I think, especially Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* was, was a really big impact on me for the way that he sort of draws out a kind of transatlantic heritage fueling the American Revolution. But I didn't, I didn't get into academic history until college.

Samuel Hurwitz 05:29
You switched from CS [Computer Science] to history in your undergrad, right? Did you take any time off between undergrad and graduate school or did you kind of go right into graduate school with you know, it seemed like you knew exactly what you wanted to do.

Boone Ayala 05:42
So, I also attended undergrad at the University of Chicago, and in a sense, my research agendas and research interests have sort of been continuous from the time that I became a history major through till now. So, I've always been interested in like law and in constitutional politics, and I've always been interested in the sort of transatlantic and trans imperial circulation of ideas about what, what the imperial constitution is and how the parts of it relate to each other. So, there's a there's a kind of continuity there.

Samuel Hurwitz 06:17
So, it seems like there's a lot of really good advantages for you to kind of stay in at the same institution, working with the same people, and kind of continuing that research and scholarship thread that you started in undergrad.

Boone Ayala 06:29
Oh yeah. You know, my switch in majors came very late actually. It was halfway through my junior year that I that I decided to pivot. So, I think, you know, I managed to finish in four but, but it was definitely the sort of situation where, especially going straight through. By the time that I was applying to grad school, I'd been a history major for eight months. You know, I was very new to it.

Samuel Hurwitz 06:55
Were there any advantages to, you know, taking a few years of being a CS major, just in transferring those CS skills to history?

Boone Ayala 07:04
I actually think, yes, in part that's I think that one of the things, the part of computer science that I liked most when I was a CS major was programming. I liked writing code, and I think I liked it because of the sort of the elegant simplicity of it. You know, every part of the code that you write is supposed to serve a specific function, and then you put them together into some sort of algorithmic procedure, and then when you execute it, you know, goes through each of the steps. And I think it just helped me to become a lot more organized in the way that I think, in general, actually. So in some ways it's a sort of, it's a sort of meta skill, but I think that, you know, I've always liked writing, but I think that my writing has become clearer and more concise by virtue of the fact that I tend to approach a lot of my writing in the same way that I would have, that I would have approached a piece of code. You know, every paragraph, every idea, is meant to serve a function that, when you, when looked at as a whole, you know, produce it like when you execute the code, the like argument fits together very naturally. And I think it's, I think that's, you know, especially an advantage in so far as most historians, I think, don't, don't get training specifically in, like writing or composition. That's not like the main skill that we're that we work in, but it is how a lot of our output is created. And so, for me, at least, I think that it's helped a lot to have this, this background in in computer science because it helps me to be a lot more organized in the way that I present information I think.

Samuel Hurwitz 08:41
Can you talk about some of the most challenging issues you've faced as a historian?

Boone Ayala 08:45
One of the biggest, one of the most obvious, and I think it's easy to forget this when you're when you're further along in it, the adjustment to 17th century paleography is honestly a massive hurdle. Not anymore, obviously, I'm over the hurdle now, but I found it very daunting at the start, not to mention the fact that a lot of that paleography varies significantly from region to region or across time. I think in particular, the focus on constitutional history has represented some challenges in so far as it's, it's, it's

experiencing a little bit of a revival at the moment, but for a long time that was, it was sort of out of vogue. It represents, in some ways, a return to a to a like early 20th century conversation within the historiography. Colonial Massachusetts is probably the most written about English overseas possession in the entire British Empire, with the possible exception of India. And so, trying to find a sort of new way to talk about it, a way to enter that conversation when that conversation has been going on since, well, I mean, since the 17th century. But I mean, within the historiography, you could go back at least as far as Thomas Hutchinson that that represents a really daunting challenge. It's, it's a, it's a tremendous weight of historiography that you have to wade through and engage with in order to have an intervention that like adds something.

Samuel Hurwitz 10:17
Why is Massachusetts talked about so much?

Boone Ayala 10:21
I think in large part it has to do with the fact that there are just a tremendous amount of documents, right? The Puritan settlers of Massachusetts Bay were obviously very literate, obviously very introspective in a number of ways, and had these robust transatlantic political and religious affiliations that meant that they sent a lot of correspondence back and forth. So, it's just, in some ways, it's a matter of archive. I think it also has a tremendous amount to do with the fact that Massachusetts is sort of the like colonial Massachusetts becomes the epicenter of the American Revolution, of course, and so looking back at colonial Massachusetts for centuries of historians, has represented a way to sort of get at the nascent American national character. And so, there's both a sort of research agenda reason and a source's reason that it tends to be focused upon so heavily. It's a, it's a tremendous blessing then, if you're, if you're interested in in Massachusetts, because you have a lot to work with. But it also, I think, this, well, this goes back to your original question about the sort of limitations or the difficulties. It means that the historical weight of colonial Massachusetts is so intertwined with the conception of American like national character, and is so often and so easily read backwards as like the origin of the Revolution, that it requires you to take a tremendous step back to be able to see the colonial Constitution the imperial Constitution, in its like 17th century guise, as opposed to its nascent United States form. And if I could, if I could briefly give like one, maybe vignette that that shed some light on this. I recently went to the Commonwealth Museum and Archives, where they have the Massachusetts

Colonial Charters on permanent display there in these beautiful, climate controlled, pressure sensitive boxes designed by MIT. And you know this, this makes a lot of sense. They're the they're, to some extent, the antecedents of the Massachusetts State Constitution. They're sort of thought of as proto-constitutional documents on both the state and the national level. I was also recently in correspondence with a county archivist in England, asking about where their 17th century like municipal charter was. And they said, like, they have no idea where it is. It's been lost. And that's not that's not in any way to, like, denigrate the work of the county archivists. But it's just a point to the fact that the ways that these documents, which are legally the same kind of document and were understood by contemporaries to be the same kind of document in the 17th century. The ways that they have been weighted down with completely different histories, means that trying to go back to a period, trying to bring yourself mentally, back to a point where you can think about them in the same plane of view is a tremendous like intellectual labor that has taken me a long time to get to.

Samuel Hurwitz 13:30
Can you give some tips to anyone listening of how you overcame the challenge of understanding handwriting from the 17th century, correct?

Boone Ayala 13:39
Yes, yeah, certainly. I think that one of the best things that you can do to help yourself get started is to look at is to get a manuscript document that also has a transcription, and then to try to do the transcription, or try to, you know, try to read the manuscript document yourself, but be able to sort of check your work. I think that that's maybe the biggest obstacle, is that if you're working with a source that has no that no other historian has looked at, or that hasn't been transcribed, anyway, it's very difficult to sort of train yourself. You need something to confirm your efforts against. And so, for me, because I was interested in in the empire, I started with the calendar of state papers colonial where a lot of documents are transcribed almost entirely because we're here. I think it would also make sense to point out that obviously the Massachusetts Historical Society has a really significant body of transcribed volumes of collections which can be compared against manuscripts, and overwhelmingly are, you know, like faithful transcriptions. But it does mean that sometimes you find like it's worth going back to the original manuscripts, both as a paleography training program, but also as a way to sort of to see, to see what things the 19th century archivists didn't catch, or what you know once, once you've spent enough

time working on the paleography you might find that you come to different conclusions about what something is saying. That's the best recommendation that I would start with is to is to use transcriptions that are available and to compare them against manuscript originals.

Samuel Hurwitz 15:15
So, can you go more in depth and talk about the project you're working on here at the MHS and how did your idea develop over time?

Boone Ayala 15:25
Absolutely. So, the project that I'm working on here at the MHS is an article about the fall of the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1684 when it finally loses its charter in the Court of Chancery to a writ of scire facias. And what I'm trying to do in this article is to situate the controversy over the Massachusetts charter in the context of the contemporaneous assault on municipal corporations in England. So this is maybe slightly less familiar to audiences who are mainly concerned with colonial history, but we hear a lot about the attack on the Massachusetts charter in this period, but in England in the early 1680s something like 60 to 70 municipal corporations lost their charters and had like new ones issued with more circumscribed privileges that left more power for the monarch. What I'm trying to do in this piece is to show that people in Whitehall, who are sort of the imperial administrators and people in the colony, are totally aware that this is one controversy, that there's not a separate colonial conflict over charters that parallels whatever's going on in England, but it's actually the same assault on corporate autonomy. And you can see this in particular in a lot of the well, okay, on the Whitehall side, you can see this in the language that figures like Edward Randolph used to talk about the colony. They often speak of the corporation of Boston. You see this like language from top jurists in England, where they talk about Massachusetts Bay being no other than a corporation. But on the colonial side, you can see it, especially in the sort of correspondence that happens between figures like Increase Mather or John Cotton, Jr and their friends and co-religionists in England and the Netherlands who are relaying news to them about what's going on in England and about the consequences of losing a charter. That is sort of helping figures like Mather understand the stakes of the conflicts that they're in. You know, it's no secret that in the late 17th century, a lot of the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay feel that the Protestant interest is on the decline. You have the persecution of Protestants in France going on. You have the sort of Tory reaction in England, which is punishing a lot of Protestant nonconformists who are friends and

fellow travelers with Mather and company, and increasingly, as a result of what they are hearing about, the about this program against, you know, Calvinists in Europe, and the ways in which, in particular in England, that program is being accomplished by taking away corporate autonomy to extend the power of the crown. This shapes the way that they're that they think about the stakes of their own charter conflict. And this comes through most especially in the in the way that that Mather in particular, ultimately argues in defense of the colony's charter. He talks a lot in in a pamphlet that he wrote in in 1683 about the sort of dire examples of what's happening in Norwich or what's happening in London once those charters, once the charters for those municipalities in England have been taken away as a way to convince the freemen of Massachusetts not to surrender the charter. And so, it's, it's, you know, it's most evident in the writings of these figures for whom we have a lot of their transatlantic letters, but it also comes through them in the kinds of arguments that they make that seem to be influential to other inhabitants of the colony. And so, it archivally, it comes through for the most part in the writings of these key figures, but the fact that they think that this argument is going to be effective also points to the fact that this is a much wider understanding of the colony as a kind of corporation alongside these other corporations.

Samuel Hurwitz 19:37
So, for clarification, are you doing this research for your dissertation or is this for a separate article or separate....

Boone Ayala 19:44
The article is a part of the dissertation.

Samuel Hurwitz 19:47
Okay. For clarification, also like, what do you mean by a corporation and charter because, you know, these are words that a modern audience would have probably very different understanding of versus what you're talking about in the historical context.

Boone Ayala 20:06
Oh, absolutely. And I think this is another one of the this is another kind of like interpretive leap that you have to make when you're trying to understand what these documents were and these institutions

were in the late 17th century. So, when we think about corporations and corporate charters today, we normally think about business corporations, firms, but in the late 17th century, corporations had a much more direct relationship with the state. Virtually all corporations were royally chartered governing institutions. In some cases, like the East India Company or the Royal African Company. These corporations existed to govern a kind of trade as well as the sort of overseas possessions that these trading companies acquired as figures like Rupali Mishra or Phil Stern have discussed. In general, when, when I talk about a corporation here, I mean something more akin to when we say like the corporation of the City of New York. What I'm trying to stress is that for people in the late 17th century, the distinctions which to us seem very obvious between a corporate municipality in England, like the corporation of the City of London, a corporate colony like the governor and company of Massachusetts Bay or a joint stock trading company like the East India Company. Those distinctions, they didn't matter nearly as much to late 17th century legal and political thinkers. For them, all of these seemingly different kinds of bodies represented the same kind of relationship to the monarch. They were all endowed, by virtue of their royal charters, with their authority. They were all answerable for sort of miscarriages of that authority to the monarch. The corporate form carried with it. Corporations were almost like offices of the crown, and corporate office holders were, in a sense, like agents of the state. Now that doesn't mean that there weren't many points of tension with the crown and with the sort of centralizing state, but the idea that these corporate bodies were ultimately governing bodies is central to the argument, and like sort of interpretive method that I'm using here. And it's fascinating because this one early modern instrument, the the corporate charter, ultimately spawns these two very different progeny, in the form of, on the one hand, sort of written constitutions, and indeed, for states like Connecticut and Rhode Island, their first state constitutions were almost direct copies of their royal charters. And on the other hand, the corporate charter of the modern business corporation. And so, part of the part of what I'm trying to do is take a step backward to a point where these two things haven't become differentiated yet.

Samuel Hurwitz 23:01

So, let's talk about the collections and the sources you're using at the MHS.

Boone Ayala 23:06

So, the main collections that I've been using here are the Prince papers, the Mather papers, the various collections of Increase Mather's diaries, correspondence, things like that, but also the sort of material culture collections. So, I want to like, well, I'll walk through those in turn. But the Prince papers are a really useful body of sources for the study of late 17th century colonial politics, colonial religion. You have letters in there from, from a whole range of figures, figures like Simon Bradstreet, a lot of stuff from John Cotton, Jr and a fair amount of their sort of transatlantic correspondence, which helps me get at the sort of the way that this issue is being talked about in its sort of wider lens. One of the things that I found most useful actually in that body of sources is a letter from not John Cotton Jr, but his son, John Cotton the third, who was a minister in Exeter, New Hampshire, to his brother Roland Cotton during his time at Harvard. And in this letter, John the third is asking his brother for a copy of a manuscript of arguments against relinquishing the charter, almost certainly the manuscript that Increase Mather wrote. And this is a really useful source, because it sort of reveals the ways in which a) this manuscript pamphlet is being talked about far afield, all the way, all the way into other colonies, but b) the ways in which it's sort of circulating surreptitiously, which is, you know, especially important given that it has given that figures like Edward Randolph, consider this manuscript to be like a piece of seditious libel. So, it helps me sort of track the movement of these ideas in a really important way. Obviously, for this article, for this chapter, Increase Mather is a really central figure, so being able to work with a lot of his diaries, a lot of his correspondence, all which are available here, chiefly in, sort of chiefly in microfilm, is a really handy way to sort of contextualize him as a figure, and to see the sort of the background of his thoughts, and especially of his reading that's informing the sort of arguments that he makes, that helps that ultimately, like circulate throughout New England in a really important way. But one of the most exciting things for me has been using the material culture collections here. By virtue of being here, I went to a couple of the talks that have been going on, and one of them was about material culture in the revolutionary Atlantic. And so, you know, reflecting on the fact that this is both an archive and a museum. I decided to call up a couple of objects and see, see what, what I what I could make of them. Some of the most exciting and interesting pieces for me have been a musket that was used at the at the sort of Siege of Fort Hill when the Dominion of New England is overthrown in 1689, and the Royal Governor Edmund Andros retreats into the fort on top of Fort Hill. This musket was like it's not clear if it was used by Andros forces or if it was used by the besieging colonists, but somebody brought this

musket to Fort Hill as part of this siege. I've also really enjoyed looking at Cotton Mather's pocket watch Increase Mather's son. His pocket watch itself is like, a really fascinating piece of craftsmanship. And really like, shows you some of the like transatlantic the transatlantic connections going on here. It's, I believe it was made in in the 1690s in London. It's really ornate. The innards are all made of like gold, and the frontispiece is sort of and the face is sort of encrusted with silver and diamonds. So, it's a really fascinating piece that sort of goes to show the ways in which these colonists didn't have their worldview was not bounded by Massachusetts, that they were part of these transatlantic networks that circulated goods and people and ideas. I want to highlight one more material collection, or material item, that I've found very useful, and I know that it's a famous one here, which is John Leverett's buff coat. This is a coat that was owned by Massachusetts Governor John Leverett, who was governor for most of the 1670s and this was the coat that he wore as a cavalry officer under Oliver Cromwell during the English civil wars in the 1640s and one of the things that's so interesting about this coat is this giant blood stain on the front of it. And you know, this is, would have been, in the 17th century, a very high status item. It's in John Leverett's official portrait. It's presumably the type of thing that he that he would have worn on, you know, a number of occasions, because of its value and because of the status that it conveyed. But one of the things that makes that really interesting then, is that, you know, we don't know when the blood stain got there, but even putting that aside, the fact that he's wearing his military coat from a period in which he was a rebel against the monarchy, goes to show the ways in which the legacy of those sort of mid-century conflicts against Charles the first continued to be consequential and influential during the reign of Charles's son Charles the second, which is when all of the conflict over the Massachusetts charter reaches its climax. So, the so like these, these different sources sort of tie together this, this Atlantic world, and also show connection across space, but they also show connection across time in a really powerful way I think.

Samuel Hurwitz 28:49
What have been some unexpected finds in the collections for you?

Boone Ayala 28:53
Sure. So, I mean, one of the most exciting things that I had seen images of before but got the opportunity to confirm while I've been here, as well as on a prior trip to the New York Historical Society, is the appearance of the seal of the Dominion of New England. So, the Dominion of New England is this

massive super colony that ultimately extends from Maine to New Jersey, and that lasts from about 1686 to 1689. This is the entity that Edmund Andros is the governor of. Most images of the seal that you see in like modern day publications about the Dominion normally show James the second giving a scroll to a kneeling colonist who's kneeling beside an indigenous American who's sort of offering the fruits of America. And overhead, there's this cherub flying that says something like, you know, never does, does liberty, like flourish more. And so, it's, in a lot of ways, it's a very like, comprehensible, like, symbol of even though this is an absolutist government, you know, it's representing itself as giving a document, giving a charter, in a way, and sort of conveying liberty through this document. A couple of years ago, while looking for images to use in a PowerPoint, I, you know, I googled the seal of the dominion to plug it in, and I found this obscure Dutch blog of American like iconography that had a very different version of the seal in it. The, you know, most of the details around the edges were the same, but the central action of the piece was reversed. So, in this version of the seal, the colonist is giving a scroll to the king. This set me on like a wild goose chase, because that's a very different message. Ultimately, I figured out that there are two existing impressions of the seal, one of which is in the New York Historical Society, and one of which is here. And so, while I've been here, I was able to see that original impression of the seal and confirm that the actual version of it is this one. This one in which liberty does not flourish according to this seal, by the king granting a charter of liberties, instead it flourishes by the colonists yielding up a document which causes like conflict and which acts so, the seal claims as a kind of barrier to liberty. And so, this is like a really interesting encapsulation of a different idea about the relationship between texts and liberty than a lot of us are used to thinking about. This was the final like check that I had to do to make sure that that version of the seal was correct. And it was very gratifying to get to get to see it and to and to confirm, at last, that the messaging of the of the dominion was not was not about giving chartered liberties, was not about giving a text. It was about the liberty that flourishes when you take it away. So, I mean, on the one hand, at a more historiographic level, what I'm trying to do is to get us to think about what a colony was before the idea of a colony had sort of coalesced. And what I mean by that is that the idea of an opposition between metropolitan England and its overseas colonies, to me, sort of it assumes that, on a constitutional level, colony meant something, and I think that ultimately it does come to mean something. But in the but in the 17th century, a lot of the institutions of overseas governance are much older institutions that had that were developed for the government of England. So, you have like lords proprietorships are largely based on Palatine of Durham and corporations like Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut, Rhode Island are based on this model that's taken from corporate

municipalities. I think that oftentimes we get so distracted by the newness of these societies that the settler colonists are founding, that we think that people didn't have the language or the conceptual framework to understand what they were in a sort of legal or constitutional sense. But I think that these early 17th century, these overseas possessions that had their sort of act of constituting in the 17th century, people knew what they were. They understood them as proprietorships on the model of the Palatine of Durham, or they understood them as corporations on the model of municipalities. They didn't have this sort of conceptual uncertainty about what they were or about what sort of obligations and privileges that grant contained in it, but they understood them in reference to their sort of metropolitan precursors. So that's sort of the historiographic dimension that I'm hoping to find, but in terms of the sort of broader what I'm hoping my work will sort of help how the way in which I think that my work might help us to understand the past differently and indeed are present differently. My hope is that by going back to a point before state and corporation were neatly distinct things, that my work will sort of contribute to a reconsideration of the institutions of political life. In the sense that I, I'm, I'm trying to problematize the category of the state by looking back at a point where the state is a much hazier entity, and where you can see, you can see these different progeny that ultimately come from it very much as part of the sort of overlapping matrix of sovereignty in the early modern world. This has been a real treat. It's been absolutely wonderful to get to spend a month here at the MHS, and I'll certainly be coming back.

Samuel Hurwitz 35:11

[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is produced at the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Boon Ayala, a PhD candidate in the history department at the University of Chicago. I've been Sam Hurwitz, your Podcast Producer at the MHS. 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.