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Donald Johnson 00:00

I'm looking at the experience of revolution in the most basic terms in local communities throughout North America. So, the kind of question that I'm approaching this with is, how did the Revolution move from something that even as late as December of 1774 where most scholars these days kind of believe that that some sort of civil war or violence or revolution was was inevitable, or was at least, kind of very, very likely. But even still, the number of kind of people in the revolutionary movement, this was a tiny fraction of Americans, right? It was an urban movement. Was something that was centered in New England, which had kind of a, kind of a robust organization. But, you know, you get to places like rural North Carolina or Western Pennsylvania or even New York, you know, a little closer to New England. It's not something that is on people's minds.

Cassie Cloutier 01:03

[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 Cassie Cloutier, Assistant Director of Research at the MHS. Today we are sitting down with Donald F. Johnson, Associate Professor of History at North Dakota State University. He is a recipient of the long-term fellowship sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Massachusetts Historical Society. So, my first question is why did you become an historian?

Donald Johnson 01:46

So, I had kind of a roundabout route, you know, I was always interested in history. As a child, I grew up outside of Washington, D.C. in suburban Maryland and was always kind of going to these different historic sites and museums and things like that. And then I kind of went through a couple of different phases, you know, I got really, I was really interested, honestly, one of the things that did it was kind of reading a lot of fiction and kind of historical novels, and then playing, you know, role playing games and video games and things like that. That's kind of, you know, seriously considering as a career. I went through a couple of different phases. At first, I kind of thought I wanted to go into more anthropology or archeology, you know. So, I kind of did that as an undergraduate, and then was more, kind of pulled towards history, more as a as a disciplinary approach, at least, and as a kind of more interesting and more, I don't know something, I felt that more aligned with my talents. So I kind of went in that direction that I didn't think, you know, that I necessarily wanted to go off and get a PhD or become a professor, you know, I thought, you know, I

had some interest in doing public history, just something I still do a little bit of. So, I went and got a master's in art and material culture from the Winterthur Program at the University of Delaware. And again, it was there, kind of, you know, that I realized I kind of wanted to go into the more academic side of history, and decided, kind of to spread out and get a PhD, so a bit of a circuit, but it made some good connections, and kind of having some of that different background, I think, makes me a better historian in general, being able to speak to a couple of different markets.

Cassie Cloutier 03:36

And from my understanding, your research projects all center around Revolutionary America. Do you think that your surroundings or the geography that you lived in played a part?

Donald Johnson 03:48

Yeah, a little bit of that and a little bit of just kind of circumstance. I knew I was interested in colonial history when I went to go and get my PhD, and then I wanted to do something in the 18th century world, I knew kind of that that Revolution era was something that really had interested me for a long time. But it wasn't until kind of getting into, I think, my reading and coursework that I started to develop kind of more questions about the Revolution. And it was really kind of getting into a first-year seminar paper where I went and studied the military occupation of Charleston, South Carolina. It kind of got me thinking in a different way about the Revolution as something that people lived through, something that that kind of ordinary people experienced and and the ways that that experience shaped those events. And then I kind of, you know, going back to the library, reading, you know, stuff by people like Al Young, Gary Nash, Jack Green, I'm very influenced also by, by my PhD thesis advisor, T.H. Breen, you know, the work of, kind of, you know. I'm sure I'm leaving a couple people out here, but these kind of people who look at kind of history from the ground up more. Mary Beth Norton, another one that I think is a huge influence on that, especially her book on revolutionary women.

Cassie Cloutier 05:12

Can you tell us about your research and what you're looking into?

Donald Johnson 05:16

I'm looking at the experience of Revolution in the most basic terms in local communities throughout North America. So, the kind of question that I'm approaching this with is how did the Revolution move from

something that even as late as December of 1774 where most scholars these days kind of believe that that some sort of civil war or violence or revolution was was inevitable, or was at least, kind of very, very likely. But even still, the number of kind of people in the revolutionary movement, this was a tiny fraction of Americans, right? It was an urban movement. Was something that was centered in New England, which had kind of a, kind of a robust organization, but, you know, you get to places like rural North Carolina or Western Pennsylvania or even New York, you know, a little closer to New England. It's not something that is on people's minds, right? It's something that people have been reading about, been hearing about, been following, but it's not necessarily something that that people, even if they're sympathetic to the revolutionaries, right, you know, in this this faction and this con, this kind of imperial crisis, they're not decided, right? There's not this kind of idea that, oh, we're going to go to war against Great Britain, even when the in 1774, even with the First Continental Congress, even with the Continental Association and the boycotts. You know, there's not this kind of decisive you know, outside of New England, at least like war is coming and we're going to go and fight the British Empire now, at least among the majority of the population. But then very quickly, after war breaks out, there's this massive mobilization. There's this massive, you know, like, like, and it's been observed in different places and by different historians. Charles Royster calls it this, this 'Rage Militaire' or 'Rage Militaire.' I don't know how it's pronounced in French, but this kind of outpouring of support that surprises everybody, and that kind of is at its base, this, this kind of grassroots mobilization. So the question I kind of took in, and at the same time, we've got this, this, you know, period over the spring, summer, fall of 1775 where a bunch of different interesting things are happening all at once, where the Continental Congress is meeting, and there's these great debates between John Adams and John Dickinson about how far to go in the war the moderates and I'm using Dickinson and Adams as being facetious, but the moderates and the more radicals and the few conservatives that are left, you know, trying to figure out kind of how far to take this, this movement. There's the organization of the Continental Army. There's the the fall of 13 different colonial regimes in 13 different ways, right the in the replacement with essentially, kind of these new revolutionary conventions that aren't really that sure what to do either. The project is looking at the kind of basic unit of revolutionary organization on the ground, these Committees of Safety that existed in almost every town and county in revolutionary America, and how the leaders of these took control of the revolutionary movement and kind of pushed it forward, protected it, and kind of established a tenuous kind of revolutionary authority in the absence of kind of clear leadership from above, and partly in order to restrain what they feared would be kind of indiscriminate violence or chaos if they left the Revolution to the instincts of kind of the people beneath them, right, the, I should say, the rabble, you know, if you to use an 18th century term, or the kind of, you know, uneducated

populace. So they're kind of trying to tread this, this balance between restraining the radicals among the poorer elements of the population who just want to kind of shoulder their muskets and go shoot Redcoats with the kind of dalliances of the or kind of inactivity of the people above them there, and obviously of kind of the middle managers of revolution or the minor leaguers of the kind of revolutionary leadership coalition. But it's them, you know, they're the ones who step up in the summer and through the fall and winter of '75 and by '76 they're the ones who turn to their leaders and say, you know, look, we've come this far. You know, you guys might be keeping your options open, but we're committed, and they're the ones who kind of ultimately demand independence and the establishment of a new government.

Cassie Cloutier 10:10
Are these folks who are the leaders of these committees do we know them or are they totally overlooked by history?

Donald Johnson 10:17
We know a few of them. There's some that kind of pop up mostly in other, other ways. Yeah, my one of my favorites is, as a young man, one of the more prominent committee men in, I think it was Dunmore County Virginia, which is the county in the western part of Virginia, was William Clark, who would then go on to be Lewis of that Lewis and Clark. So, like a couple of these, these people, you know that they'll go on to do other things, or they'll kind of appear or, you know, some of them go on to become officers in the Continental Army, or a couple of them end up going on to serve in Congress or at higher levels. For the most part, though, you know, and I feel like they are more ordinary. They're, they tend to be kind of six to 12 members. They're, they're the local elite. They're kind of, I kind of often refer to them as kind of a minor league baseball team, sometimes, where they're there that you have kind of the the up and comers, the young men, and this is Clark, is one of these you know, who are on their way, but not quite there yet, right? They haven't had the offices or the experience or gotten rich enough to kind of really crack the elite of their province or their or the Empire, but they're kind of on their way, right? They can expect they're in their 20s or late teens, and by their 30s or 40s, they can expect to have kind of higher aspirations. There's the kind of has beens. These are people like Edward Shippen the third in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who's 81 years old in 1775 when he chairs the local Committee of Safety. And he's been a judge in the county for 30 years. He was high up in the proprietary government in like the 1740s and has kind of a massive paper trail, and kind of, you know, he takes up this, this gavel as Chair of the Committee of Safety, kind of reluctantly, and sees it as kind of his, his duty to, kind of his community, to make sure that if this thing is going to happen, it's

going to happen, at least with with some kind of experienced leadership. So, on the two extremes, there's these kind of, you know, has been big wigs, and kind of will be people will be kind of up and coming young men. And then in the middle, there's all of these kinds of ephemeral types, you know. There's people like in Virginia, you know, on one committee, there's the local Anglican minister who's doesn't appear other than, you know, his an announcement of his appointment in the newspaper, and a couple of, you know, sermons and things. There's another person that, as far as I can tell, is a former Royal Navy Purser who bought plantation, you know, five years before the outbreak of the Revolution. There's a lot of diversity. And a lot of the, I think, of the like, the great majority of them, are kind of these big fish and small ponds, these these people that are of local note, but not rising to that, that kind of higher level. And, you know the local lawyers who don't ride circuit, right, but who handle things, the justices of the peace, the you know, the wealthy merchants or the shopkeepers. You know these, these types of wealthy farmers, a lot of them, or kind of small-scale plantation owners in the south. And as time goes on, the kind of social circumstances get a little more lax, kind of, as the Revolution continues and splits different communities, you see more and more people from kind of the lower sorts coming into the leadership of these communities as well.

Cassie Cloutier 13:55
And it sounds like it's borrowing from your influences of bottom up histories?

Donald Johnson 14:01
Yeah, absolutely.

Cassie Cloutier 14:01
Where did this idea develop from?

Donald Johnson 14:06
To be honest, it's something that I think is overlooked. It's, you know, you read how many you know histories of the Declaration of Independence, and it's, it's the Continental Congress, or at most, it's, it's kind of widened out to some kind of provincial elites, or, you know, some discussion of Virginia, or Patrick Henry, or George Mason, or these, these types,. I don't know. I feel like our interpretation of the Revolution, and with, you know, a lot of scholars except working in kind of a similar vein, a lot of scholars who've been through the Mass Historical Society. In fact, our memory of the Revolution has been for so long, so dominated by this kind by questions that really don't relate to ordinary people. First by, I think, this

question of kind of the founding generation and creating a mythology or mythologizing this idea. And I'm drawing here on kind of Michael Adams work on the memory of the Revolution and throughout history, but the this idea of the Revolution as this moment where moderate, well thinking, well educated, not noble, but not, you know, the worst took power and kind of established this enlightened society, right? That they kind of, you know, there's this idea that, okay, we have the Boston Tea Party, we have all of this mob violence, and then, you know, we have at Lexington and Concord, which is a at its core, core, right, a mob action, right? The outbreak of the war is, is this kind of riotous action? But then we get to 1776 and it's, it's okay well, now we're establishing state constitutions, and now we're kind of creating representative governments and republics, and it's all kind of in these elite halls of power. And the interpretation right has been that there's this moderation to it, right? And this is obviously also influenced by the French Revolution 15 years later, by the Haitian Revolution a decade after that, you know. So the first generation of people writing about the American Revolution are thinking, you know, we don't want our revolutions to be compared to those bloody fiascos that resulted in, you know, all of this death and chaos and social leveling, which was worse than the death and chaos for a lot of them, and freedom for black people in Haiti. And so any of that kind of stuff associated with the American Revolution kind of gets whitewashed by a lot of the early revolutionary historians, and then it happens again to another generation of historians in the middle of the 20th century when when the American Revolution can't possibly be anything like the Bolshevik Revolution, right? Can't possibly be anything like the anti-colonial movements that are occurring in Africa and East Asia and other places. Whereas, you know, it took until 1973 and the brilliant and late John Shy to say, look, you know, if you compare the American Revolutionary War, just from a military standpoint, to the Vietnam War there's a lot of similarities in a rural insurgency taking on a better equipped, better planned, better resourced imperial power and winning. And so, opening up, you know, and I think you know this, that kind of opening up of of revolutionary experiences from kind of the 1970s onward has, has really, really flourished. And we're at a point now where, where I think we can delve a little deeper, right? We've got some of these, these kind of representative groups and one of the things I'm trying to do with with this project is to not limit it, right? We've got some really good, kind of limited studies and and, you know, and I mean geographically or kind of to one or two communities, and, you know, you have to pick and choose when you write. But I'm hoping this, this will kind of speak to a larger revolutionary experience and really kind of act as a counterweight to some of these more sanguine, I guess, or bloodless histories of the Revolution.

Cassie Cloutier 18:34

So, I do want to ask you about the sources you're using at the MHS.

Donald Johnson 18:39

A lot of what I've used here has been kind of on the margins of, kind of the larger collections. And what I mean by that is looking at the papers of some of these revolutionary leaders, Joseph Warren, Samuel, Adams, a couple of these other Caleb Davis is one whose papers I just got finished looking through yesterday in the reading room and looking for kind of traces of a kind of their work as committeemen themselves, which they were, but also kind of operated in this higher echelon, but a lot of in their correspondence with various committees. One of the greatest sources I've found here has been the Boston Committee of Donations records. This was a committee that the Boston Committee of Correspondence, which was the big revolutionary group with Sam Adams and John Adams and Paul Revere and all the people who were buried in the old granary. But the Committee of Correspondence in the summer of 1774 after the Coercive Acts came into effect, shutting down the port established, they kind of called for help throughout the colonies, for organization and a boycott, but also for material help right and for donations to alleviate the suffering of the poor in the city who would suffer the most from the loss of trade and the loss of everything, kind of the more expensive life that was forced the privations of the occupation. And so one of the first acts that a lot of these kind of local committee organizations do is to rally their neighbors and countrymen and send supplies to Boston and reading through the correspondence of the Committee of Donations, which was this subgroup of the the Committee of Correspondence that was kind of in charge of organizing and distributing these, these donations. It's just really interesting to see the first of all, kind of the language that these, these kind of people in places like, you know, Worcester County, Maryland, or Loudoun County, Virginia or Cape Fear North Carolina, right, are using in writing to the Committee of Correspondence in Boston and kind of sending, you know, 1000 bushels of grain, or, you know, a couple of barrels of salt pork, or whatever they could, you know, round up in their communities. And sometimes it's quite a lot. In Charleston, South Carolina, they round up a shipload of rice. So, in Charleston, South Carolina, they round up a shipload of rice and send it up to New York City to be auctioned and then use the proceeds to buy food for Boston's poor. So, it's sometimes it's quite substantial. You know what they're sending. And they're writing these, these kind of, you know, love letters, almost, they're, they're writing these cautious love letters right. They're saying, we appreciate what you're what you're doing, you know, like Boston is standing, you know, a lot of them use this kind of language of the imperial crisis for the liberties of America, or, you know, for the cause. And the interesting is, you know, they, they get letters back. The

Committee of Donations you know, despite all of the activity that's going on in Boston and southeastern Massachusetts in late '74 and early '75 you know, people like Joseph Warren and Samuel Adams are writing back to, you know, the this three person committee in Worcester County, Maryland on the eastern shore, and saying, you know, like, you know, thank you, like, you know, our fellow Christians in Maryland, you know, like our brethren in arms. And this, it's this kind of moment of expanding the revolutionary coalition. So, it was really, really cool to dive into that correspondence and and then start piecing together, you know, who was, where, when, and kind of doing the detective work about the different committees that are writing into Boston.

Cassie Cloutier 22:27

Is there a challenge with navigating or is there a dominance of elite voices that you have to parse through? How do you get to the non-elite voices?

Donald Johnson 22:39

It's hard. In a couple of cases, there are good committee records, but only in like three or four times where you can actually see some of these debates kind of play out in the minutes or in these areas. And then in a couple of places, there's, there's correspondence, but a lot of it is, is kind of indirect. A lot of it is, is kind of accounts, yeah, through it and again. You know, as I said, a lot of my work at the MHS has been kind of in the margins of some of these more elite collections, where you'll find a lot of what I found is kind of committees writing to their provincial legislatures or to the Continental Congress. Those letters kind of survive in the congressional record or in the provincial record, whereas no record of that committee has surfaced, or at least not that I've been able to find. That end has been a lot of kind of reading against the grain. The other part is kind of learning how to read kind of elite speak for when they're actually kind of afraid of the people and when they're actually kind of doing something, that is what these people put into writing, and how they put it into writing, they're very cautious about. And so, they might say something like, you know, had a little scuffle with the loyalists, you know, the other night. Might send some prisoners down to the Capitol, or to where, or we took some prisoners. What do we do with them? And it's this kind of matter of fact way, and it's like, well, no, we had a battle where a couple of dozen loyalist militia fought a couple of dozen Patriot militia. You know, several people were killed. And we have, like, essentially, prisoners of war. And you know that the incident I'm thinking of takes place in Western New York, and then the committee at Albany, which is supposed to be in charge, receives this, this letter, and they say, wait, wait, what you took prisoners? What we're not even supposed to be fighting anyone like, you know, it's a

kind of, you know, there's this, this back and forth, where you can see the different undercurrents at play, but, but again, a lot of its guesswork, or not guesswork, but kind of making these educated guesses, kind of cross checking these different people's backgrounds, and again, those networks, and kind of putting a finger on who's where, when is a lot of it and that kind of trying to trying to, kind of not lose sight of again, the experience of it, right? I keep, you know, thinking to myself, like what it must have been like for, you know, well, to do farmer in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, you know, whose previous experience in government was, you know, every other year serving on a jury, or maybe being a justice of the peace you know, or you know something you know, like maybe had a term in the house of the colonial assembly a couple years earlier, and now, all of a sudden, in May of 1775 he's meeting every week with the rest of the you know, these committee men and and making, you know, these, these life or death decisions to you know, about imprisoning loyalists, about confiscating property, in some cases, about exercising summary justice, and this kind of, what must that have been like? And the kind of trauma of that experience, I think, is, yeah, so a lot of it's got that kind of reconstructing the the world of these committee men, more than anything else.

Cassie Cloutier 26:09

So, I understand you're leaving the MHS soon. This is your last week with us. Have there been any unexpected finds while you've been here?

Donald Johnson 26:17

The Committee of Donations records was a pretty spectacular one. The other was just looking through the and honestly, it's the most boring thing. But like I found so much that sent me down so many rabbit holes, just looking through the miscellaneous manuscripts, miscellaneous bound manuscripts collection. You know, I sat down one day with with 1774 through 1776 and just kind of page through and and saw what was there. And you know, in those books, they're they're organized in the reference room, they're organized chronologically, so you can just kind of go through, and I found some really interesting correspondence, some really interesting collections and other that related to other archives, and just some really interesting kind of odd manuscripts that I don't think I would have ever figured out how to find in the in the catalog. So that was, that was fun.

Cassie Cloutier 27:10

So, my final question is how do you think your research will help audiences better understand the past?

Donald Johnson 27:17

I think it makes it more relatable. I think the way, if you think about it in terms of, these people weren't part of some impossibly foreign generation. These, these people weren't, you know, these kind of immaculate heroes or dire villains, right? And I think one of the problems, and Johann Neem has has written some really interesting pieces about this, is that there's this, there's this instinct on on both sides of the political and the scholarly spectrum to kind of either say, oh, well, well, everyone in the past was great, was better than us, and the founding fathers knew everything. And if we could just, you know, elect Thomas Jefferson president tomorrow we everything would be great. And then on the other side, you know, it's Jefferson's a slave holder and a misogynist, and, you know, tortured people and all of these, you know, and a villain, and there's nothing we can, you know, take from him. And it's like, well, no, of course, neither of these things is true. And of course, even the people making those arguments understand them, but I think this is more the way that they get portrayed, to put the public right, and especially when you know you have some of the bestselling history books out there by people like Sean Hannity and David Barton right who are who are kind of not the most scrupulous researchers. So I think, you know, on the one hand, there's, there's this idea of making the Revolution into something, but, but I think, you know, the way to approach it isn't, isn't to go in and say, like, like, you know, oh, by the way, like, there, there is also these other dimensions to it. It's, it's that, this kind of, you know, okay, yes and there's this other aspect to it, right, and there's this everyday experience aspect where you could actually maybe see yourself right. You could actually maybe see your community. You could think about kind of what might happen if a revolution broke out, you know, this summer, and you know, your community is forced to kind of govern itself, or mobilize or figure out what to do, right, you know and it makes it more relatable. And also, I think, I think, you know, there's a real necessity to make the past human, and remember that these are people with the same emotions and ambitions and intelligence and creativity that we possess, and kind of restoring these experiences, I think, helps make that line a little clearer for people.

Cassie Cloutier 30:01

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