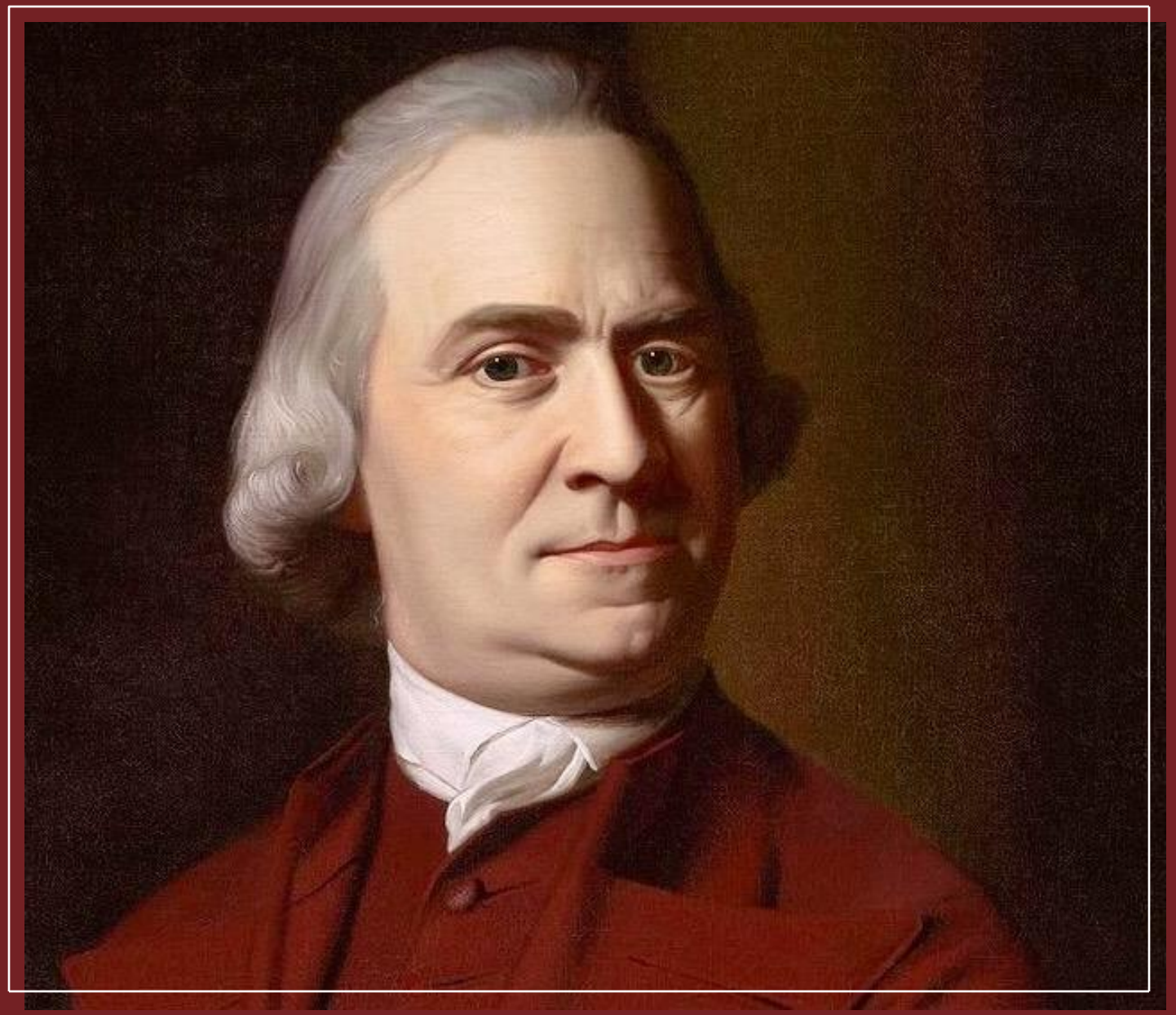


Samuel Adams

Mastermind of the American Revolution

Margot Morrell

"Massachusetts led the thirteen colonies...;
...Boston led Massachusetts...;
...Samuel Adams led Boston."

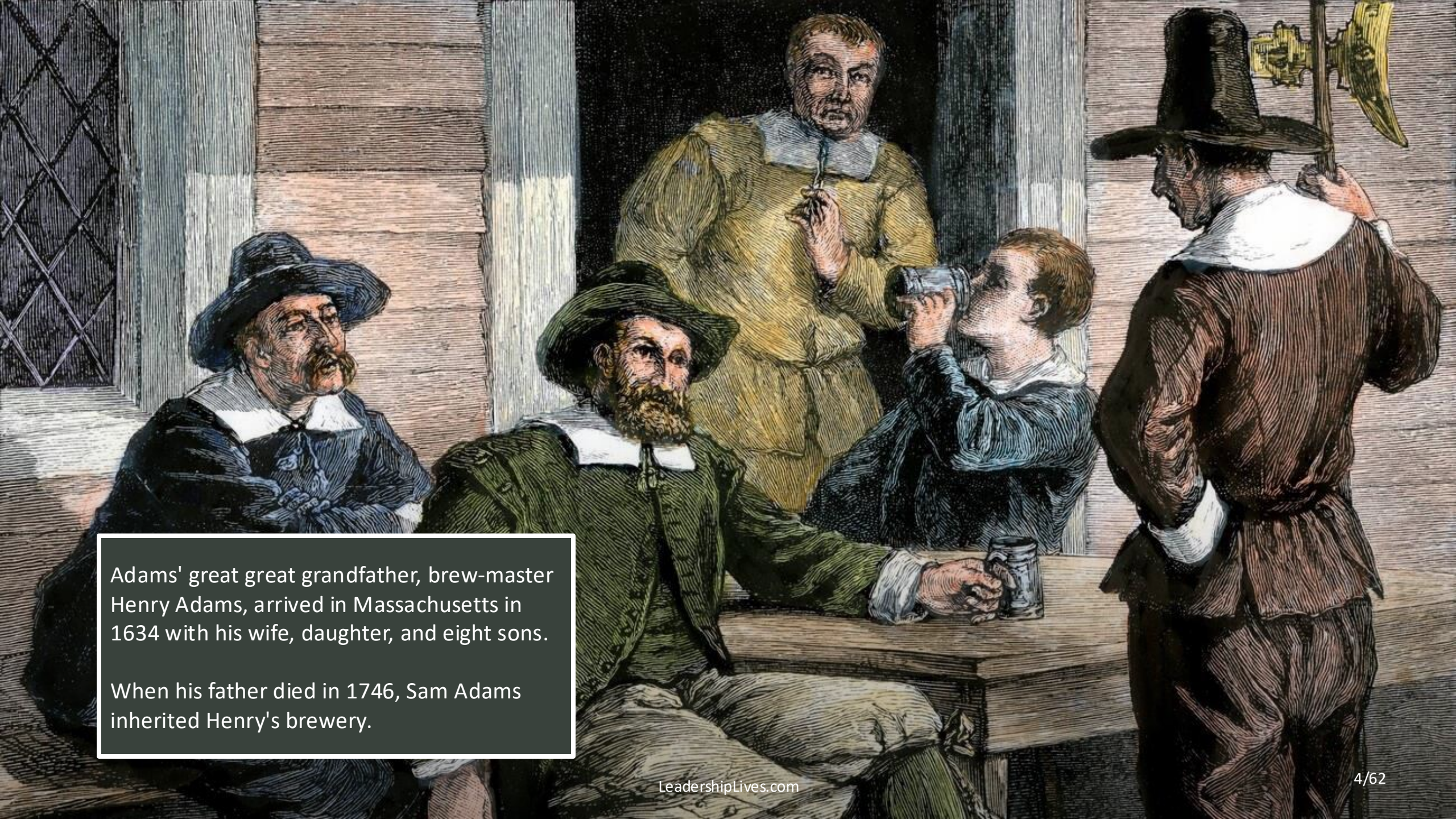
James K. Hosmer, 1885
Samuel Adams

Sam Adams was born in Boston in September 1722. He excelled at Boston Latin School, graduated from Harvard, and spent three years polishing his writing and speaking skills while studying for a master's degree in law and government at Harvard.

For his thesis he chose to argue "Whether it be lawful to resist the supreme magistrate, if the commonwealth cannot otherwise be preserved."

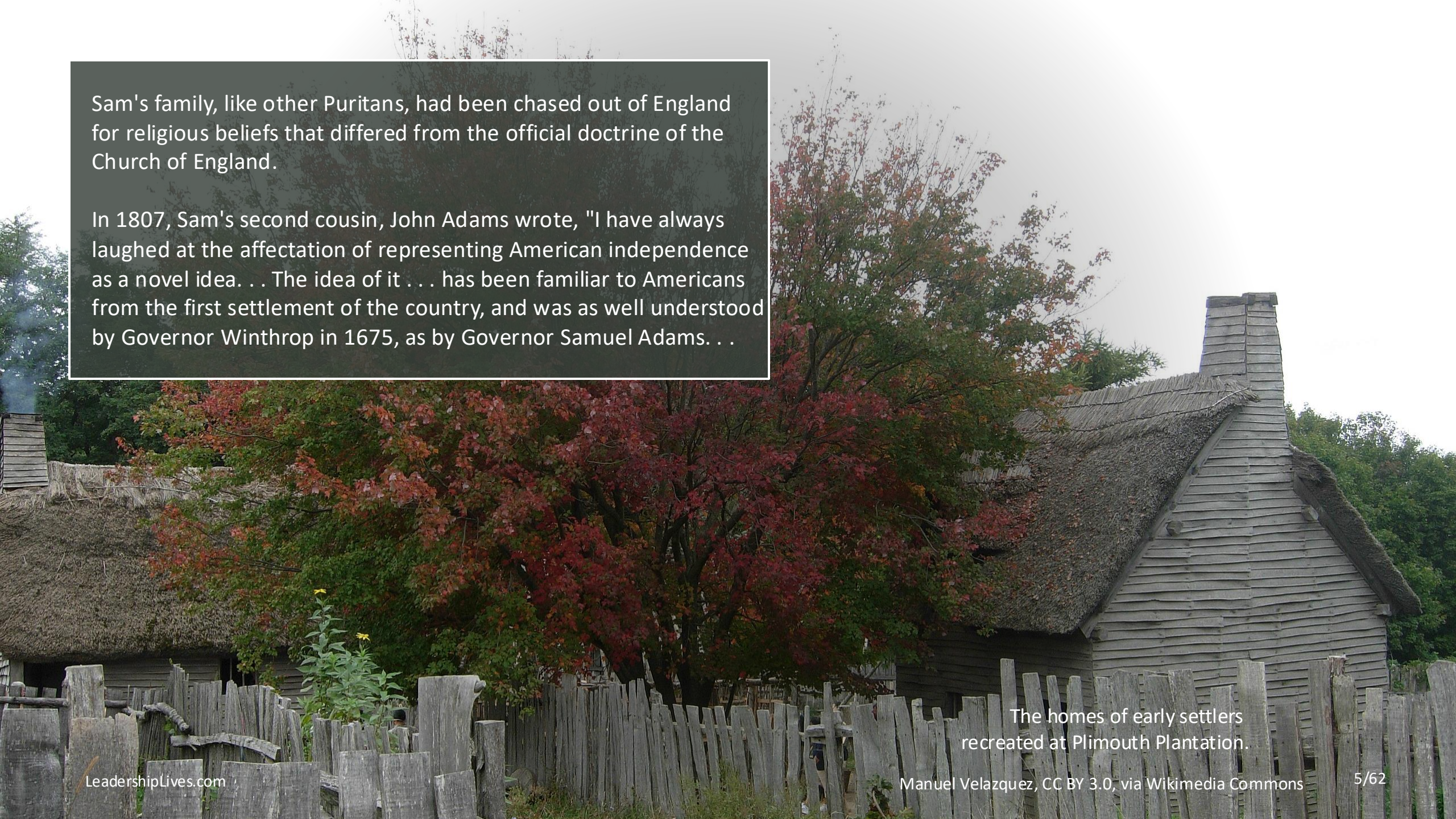
With extraordinary foresight and courage, he told a panel of senior Royal officials the answer was "Yes."

Adams then published a pamphlet, *Englishmen's Rights*. For the rest of his life, he fought for the principles he held dear – liberty and freedom.



Adams' great great grandfather, brew-master Henry Adams, arrived in Massachusetts in 1634 with his wife, daughter, and eight sons.

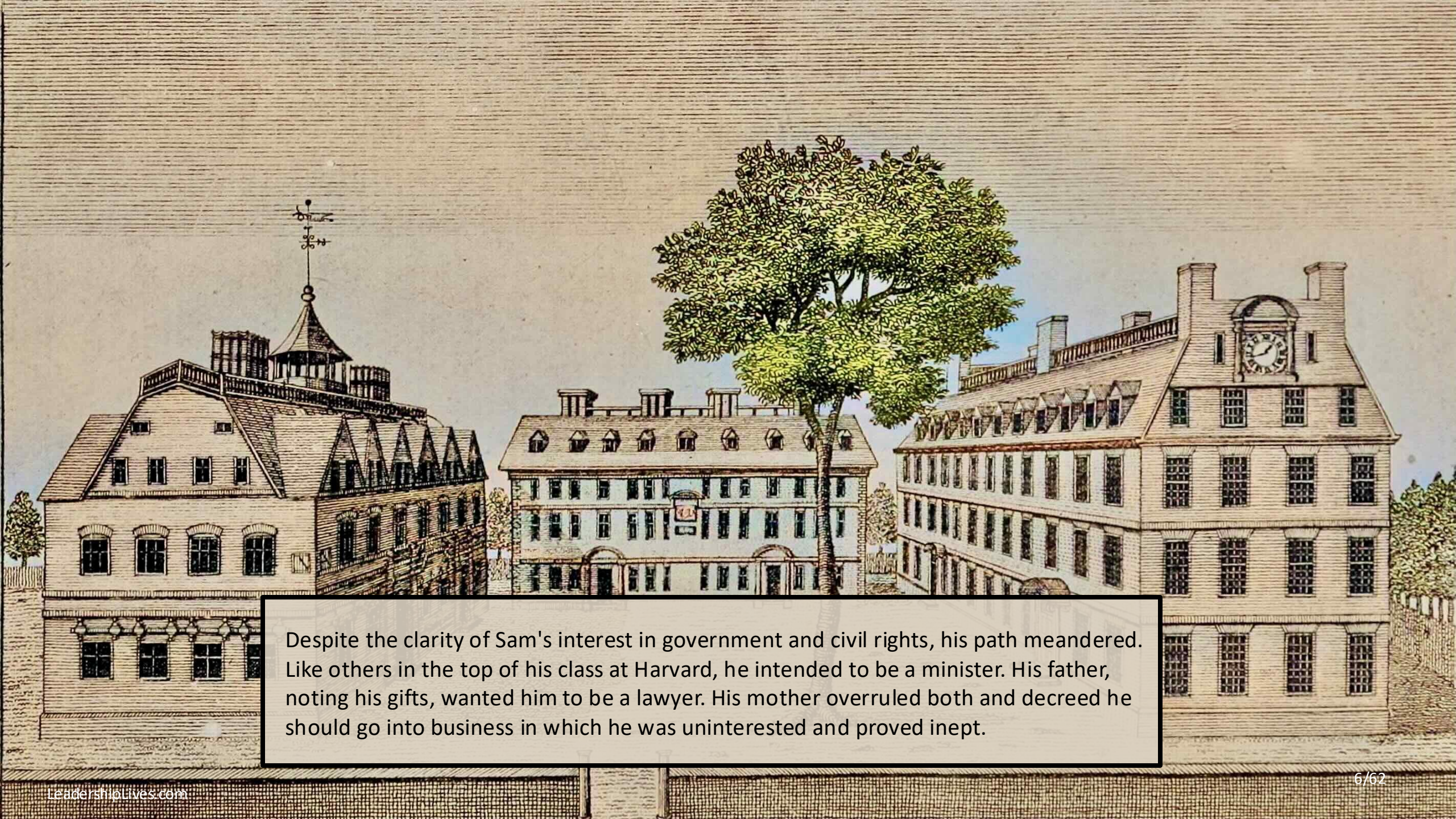
When his father died in 1746, Sam Adams inherited Henry's brewery.



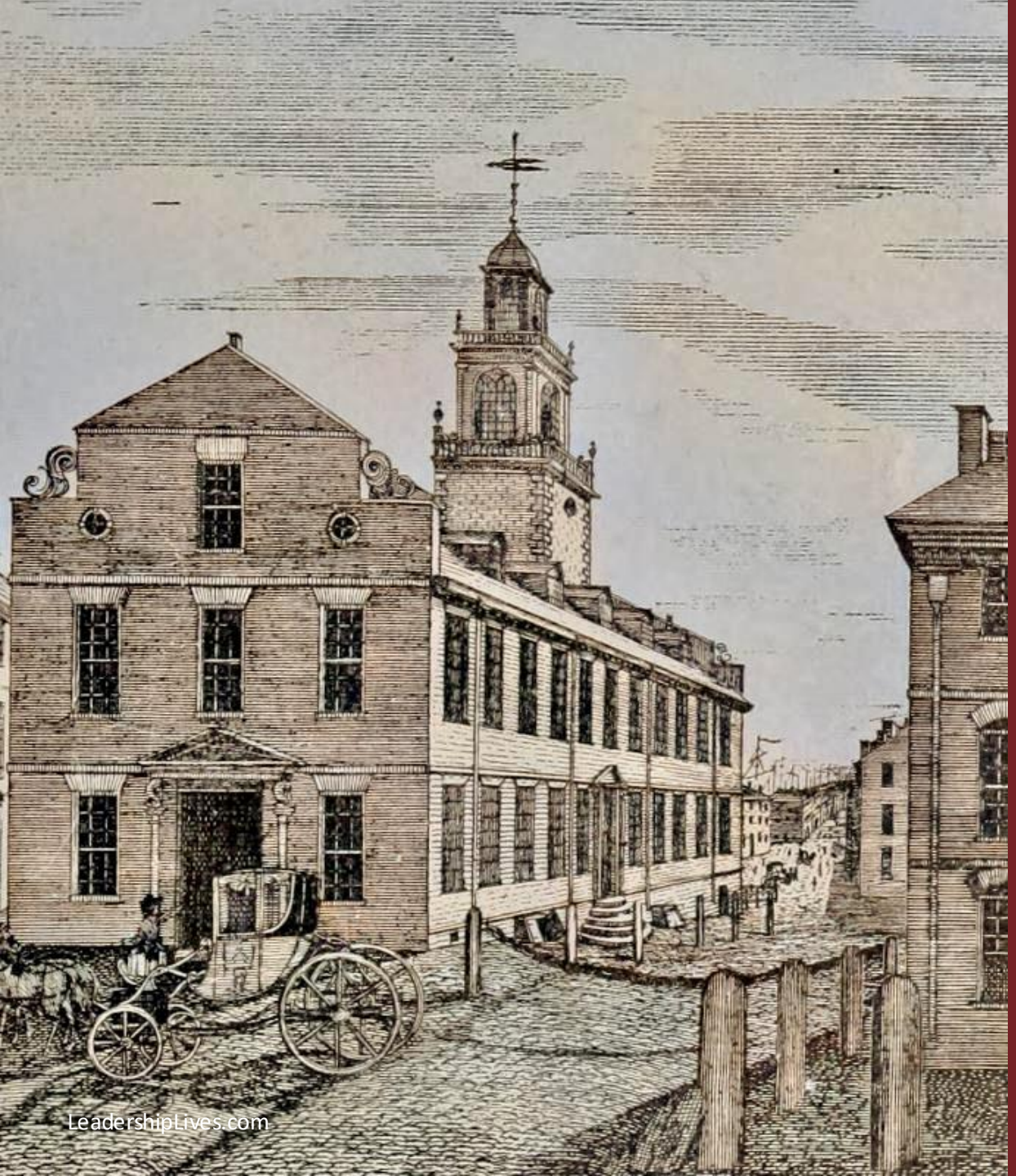
Sam's family, like other Puritans, had been chased out of England for religious beliefs that differed from the official doctrine of the Church of England.

In 1807, Sam's second cousin, John Adams wrote, "I have always laughed at the affectation of representing American independence as a novel idea. . . The idea of it . . . has been familiar to Americans from the first settlement of the country, and was as well understood by Governor Winthrop in 1675, as by Governor Samuel Adams. . .

The homes of early settlers recreated at Plimouth Plantation.



Despite the clarity of Sam's interest in government and civil rights, his path meandered. Like others in the top of his class at Harvard, he intended to be a minister. His father, noting his gifts, wanted him to be a lawyer. His mother overruled both and decreed he should go into business in which he was uninterested and proved inept.



While working in the business office of prominent merchant, Thomas Cushing, Sr., Adams founded a newspaper with friends and organized a club to write political essays.

Using a number of aliases - a favorite was "Vindex," a Roman governor who loved freedom - Adams wrote letters to newspapers and developed a reputation for his clever, well-reasoned perspective.

In 1742, when Thomas Cushing, Sr. was elected Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, a door opened for Sam Adams to get involved in local government.

Sam married Elizabeth Checkley in 1749. She died in childbirth in 1757, leaving Sam with six-year-old, Samuel, and one-year-old, Hannah. Six years later, Sam Adams married Elizabeth Wells. They did not have children.

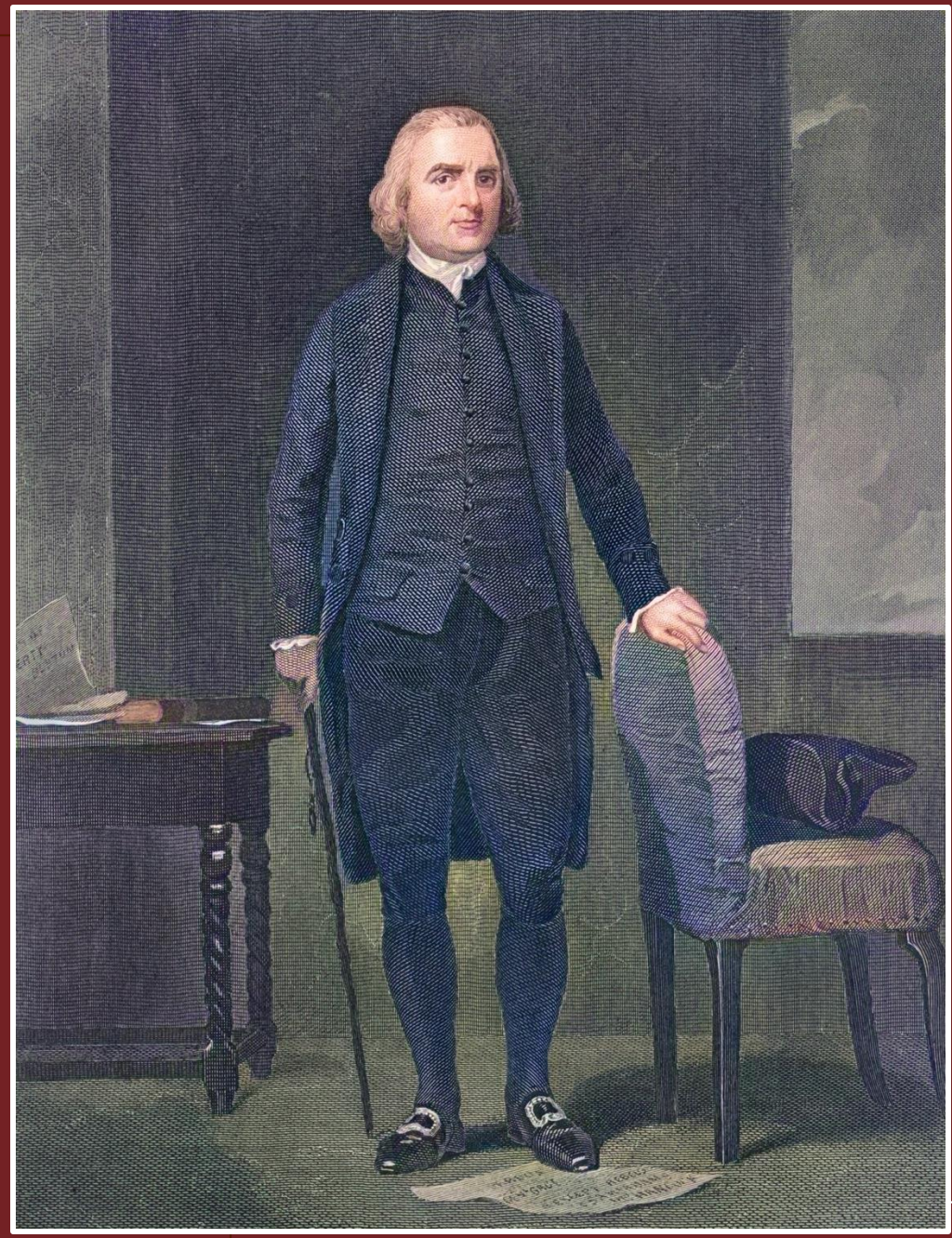
This 1933 photo of Paul Revere's house provides an idea of what Adams' world may have looked like.

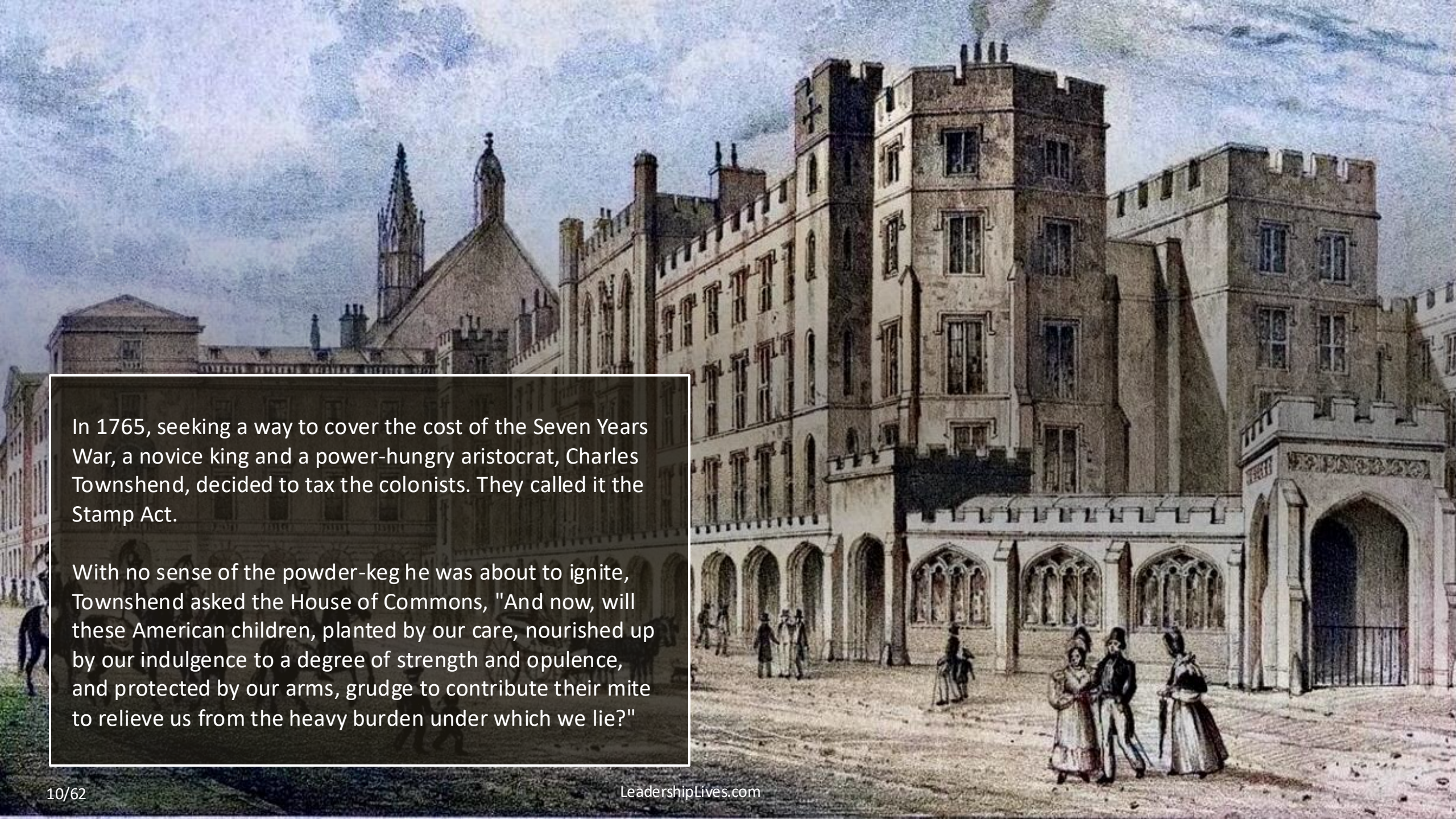
19th century historian Samuel A. Drake described Adams' home as "a two-story wooden house, fronting on the street; at the back was an L, and in the rear a small garden." The house was standing as late as 1820.

Paul Revere House, LOC

From 1763 to 1765, Adams served as a tax collector and got to know a broad swath of fellow Bostonians.

From talking to neighbors in their homes, he understood that in an economy based largely on self-sufficiency and bartering, people didn't have money to pay taxes.





In 1765, seeking a way to cover the cost of the Seven Years War, a novice king and a power-hungry aristocrat, Charles Townshend, decided to tax the colonists. They called it the Stamp Act.

With no sense of the powder-keg he was about to ignite, Townshend asked the House of Commons, "And now, will these American children, planted by our care, nourished up by our indulgence to a degree of strength and opulence, and protected by our arms, grudge to contribute their mite to relieve us from the heavy burden under which we lie?"

Isaac Barré, member of Parliament from Ireland, leaped to his feet to retort,

"*They planted by **your** care?*

No! Your oppressions planted them in America. They fled from your tyranny to a then uncultivated, unhospitable country, where they exposed themselves to almost all the hardships to which human nature is liable. . ."

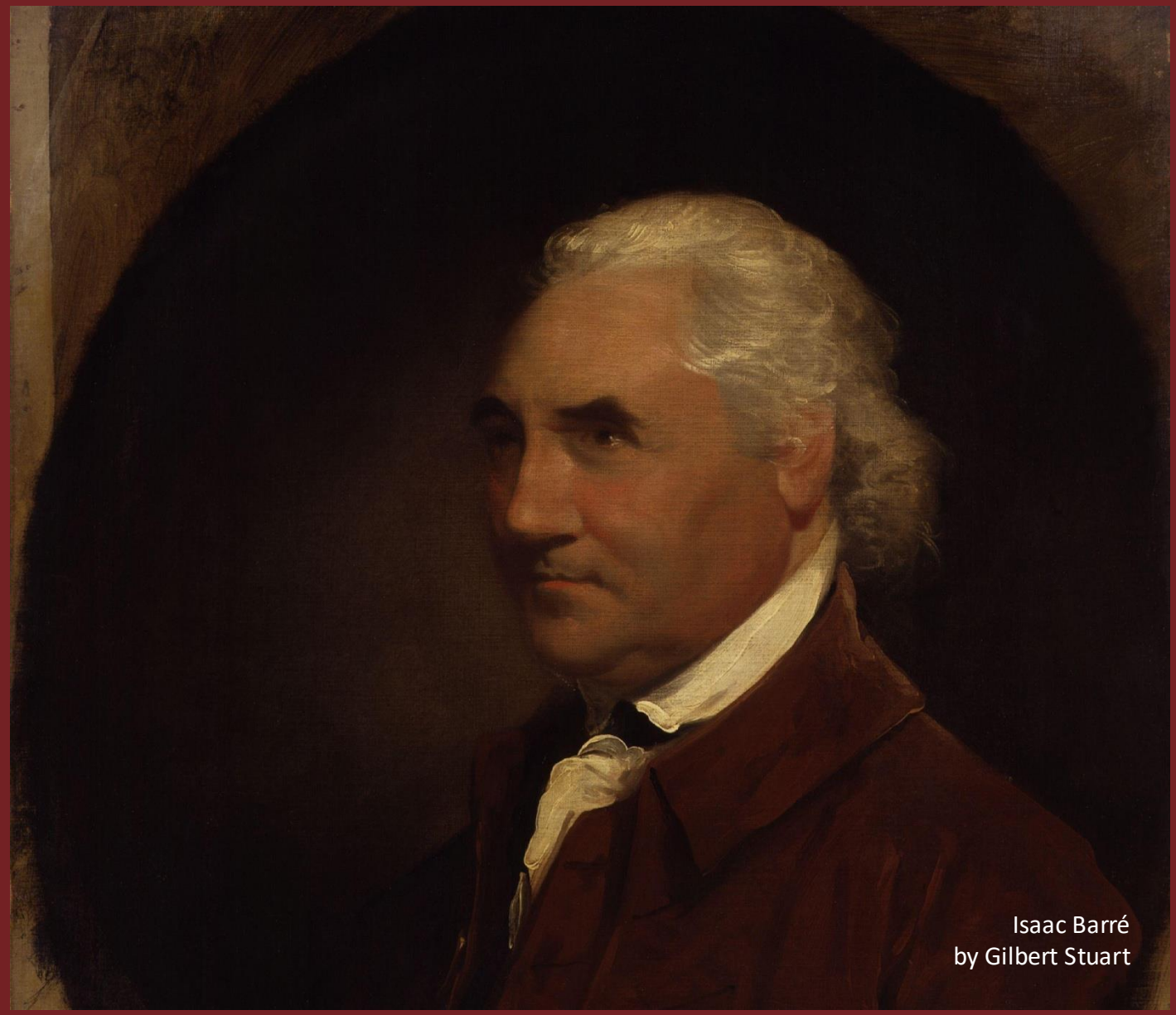
Referring to the colonists as "SONS OF LIBERTY," Barré continued,

"*They nourished up by **your** indulgence?*

They grew by your neglect of them. . .

*They protected by **your** arms?*

They have nobly taken up arms in your defense. . ."

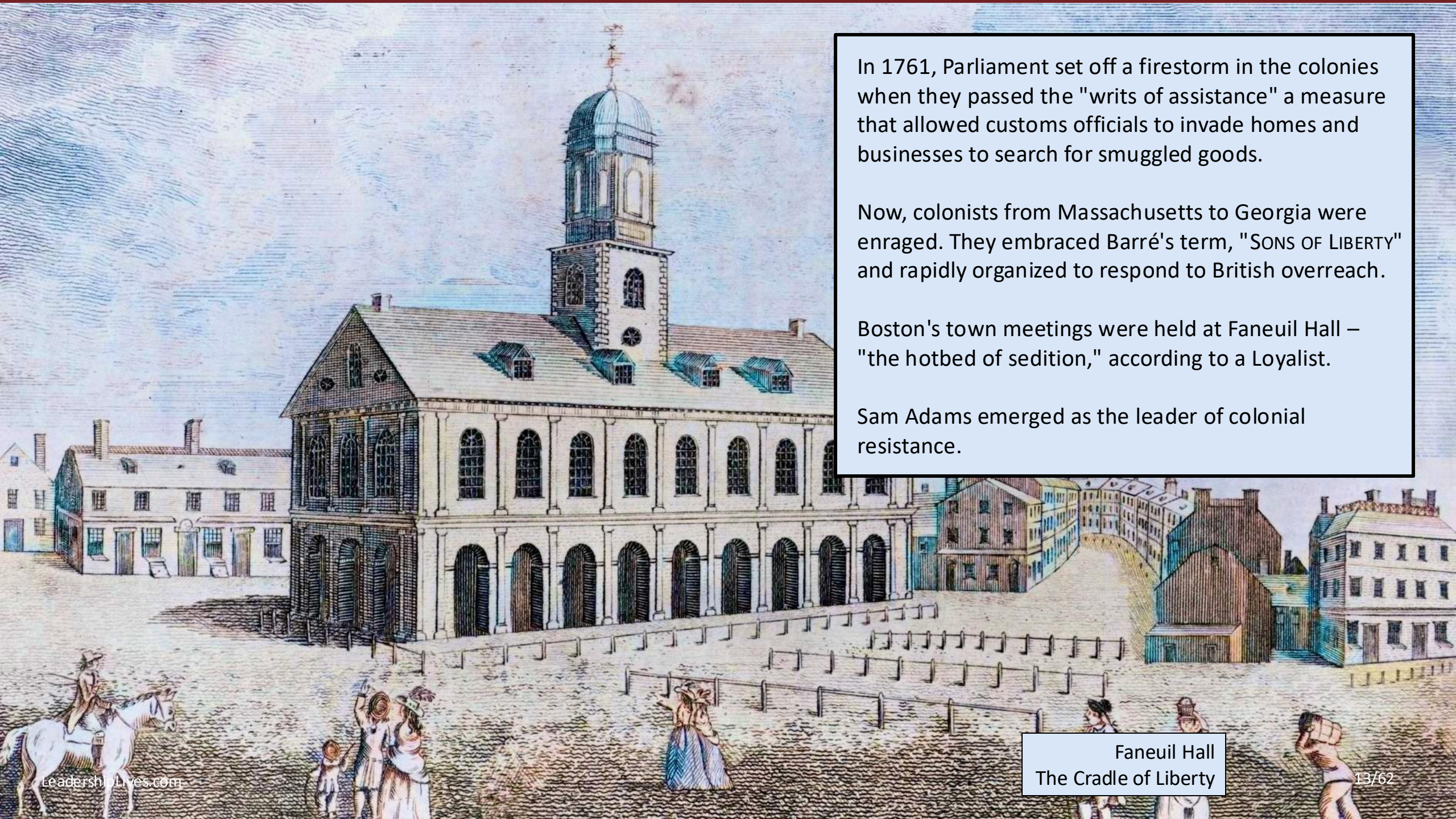


Isaac Barré
by Gilbert Stuart

In this 1783 British cartoon American troops (on the right) chase British soldiers on the left.
In the center, a tea pot explodes fueled by paper taxed by the Stamp Act.

When news of the Stamp Act reached Boston, the Loyalist Chief Justice of the Royal Courts, Thomas Hutchinson, announced the tax was now law and it was pointless to debate the issue.

In response, rioters ransacked Hutchinson's mansion in Boston's North End – he and his family barely escaped - and hanged in effigy his friend, Stamp Act enforcer, Andrew Oliver.



In 1761, Parliament set off a firestorm in the colonies when they passed the "writs of assistance" a measure that allowed customs officials to invade homes and businesses to search for smuggled goods.

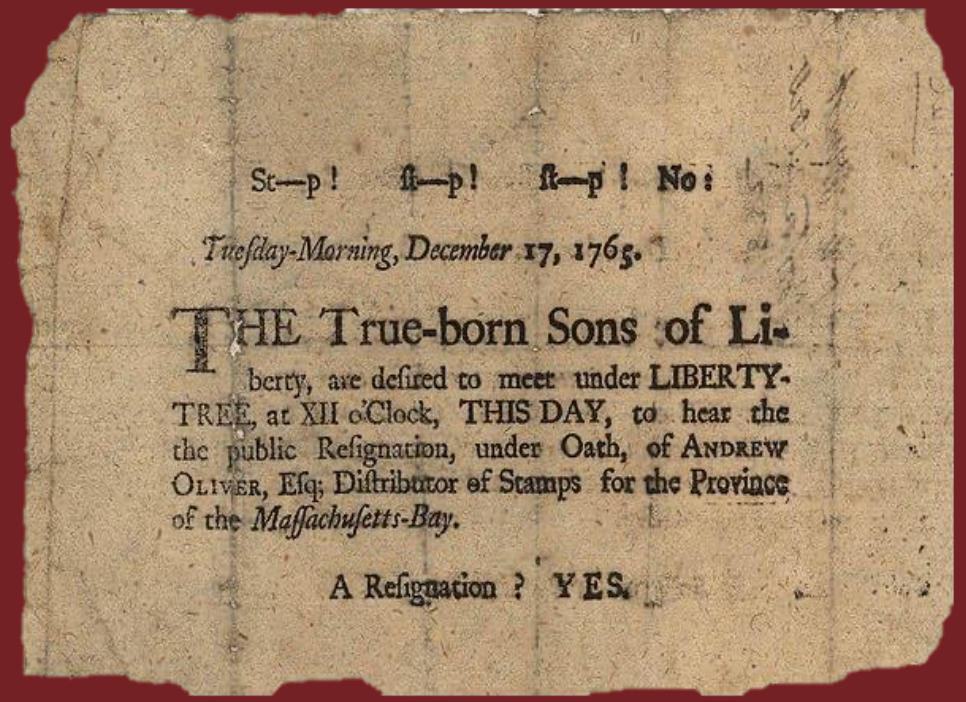
Now, colonists from Massachusetts to Georgia were enraged. They embraced Barré's term, "SONS OF LIBERTY" and rapidly organized to respond to British overreach.

Boston's town meetings were held at Faneuil Hall – "the hotbed of sedition," according to a Loyalist.

Sam Adams emerged as the leader of colonial resistance.

Faneuil Hall
The Cradle of Liberty

The Boston chapter of the SONS OF LIBERTY met at the Green Dragon Tavern on Union Street, a few steps from Faneuil Hall. Equidistant from Paul Revere's home in the North End and Sam Adams' home on Purchase Street on the Boston waterfront.



St—p! ſt—p! ſt—p! No:

Tueſday-Morning, December 17, 1765.

THE True-born Sons of Liberty, are deſired to meet under LIBERTY-TREE, at XII o'Clock, THIS DAY, to hear the the public Reſignation, under Oath, of ANDREW OLIVER, Eſq; Diſtributor of Stamps for the Province of the *Maſſachuſetts-Bay*.

A Reſignation? YES.

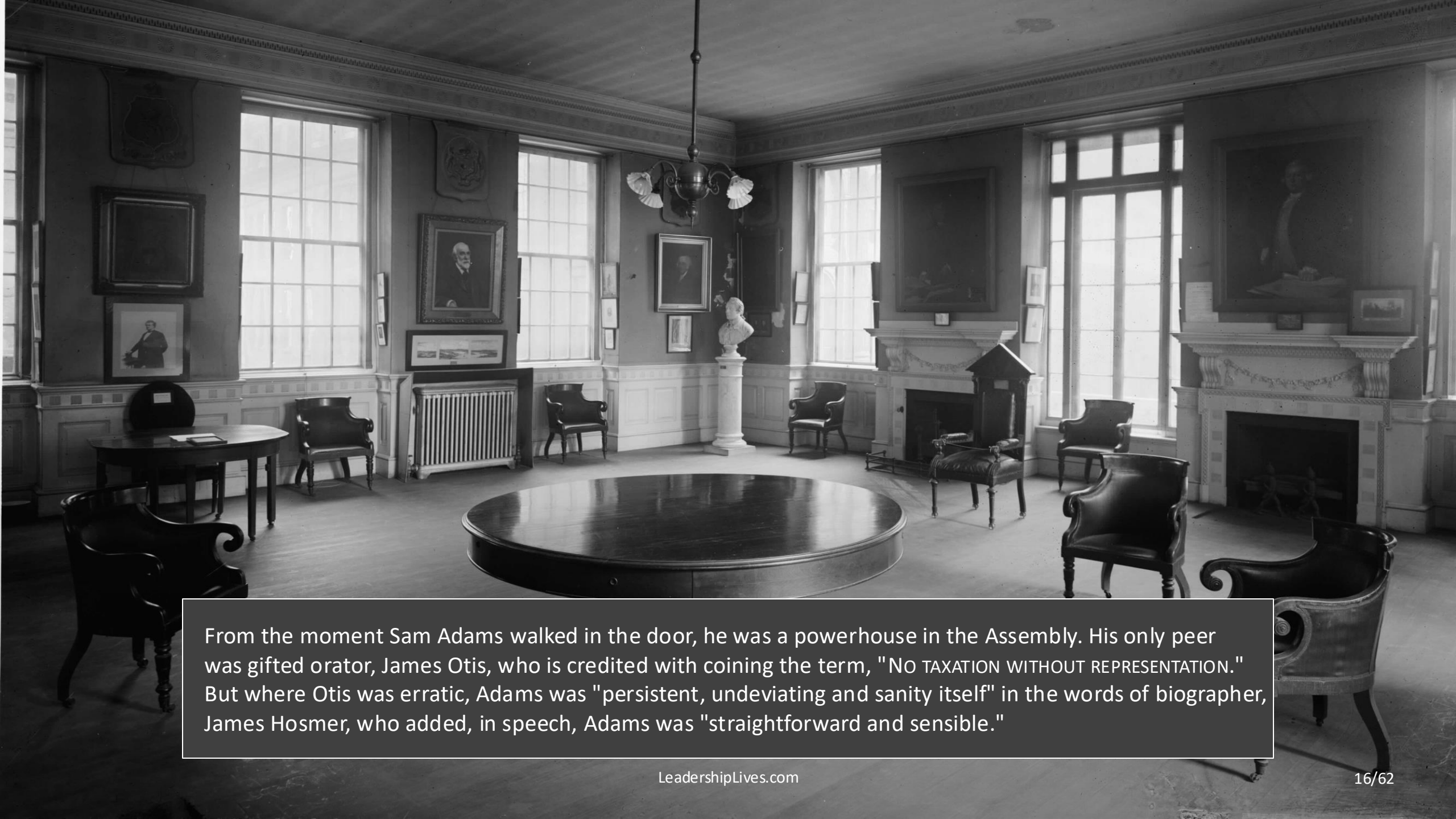
On the map, G marks Faneuil Hall

Green Dragon Tavern

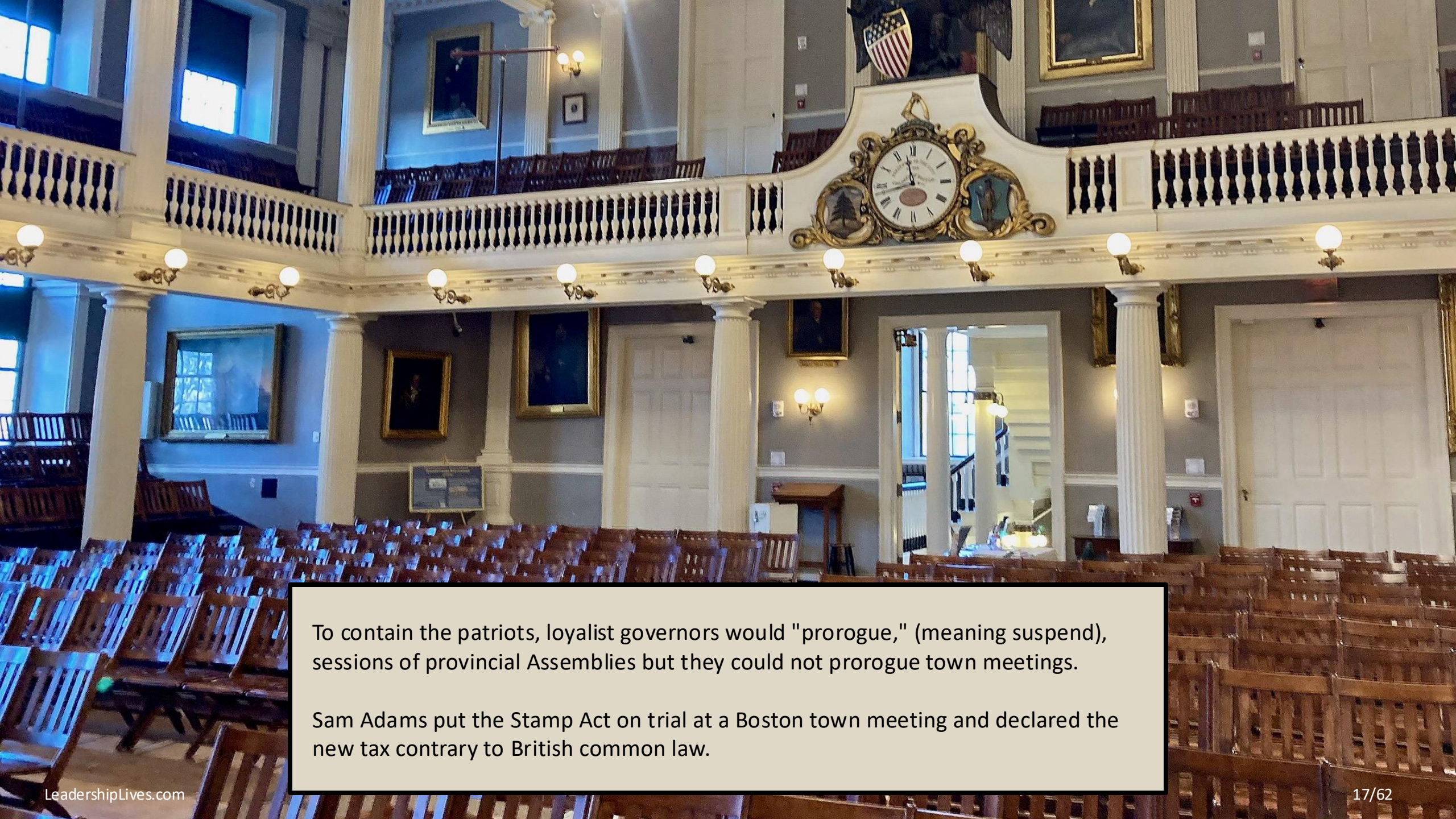
In late September 1765, a Boston town meeting elected Sam Adams to the Massachusetts Legislature.

For the next ten years – until he was elected to the Continental Congress - Adams was a fixture at the Old State House.

Old State House
State Street, Boston, MA



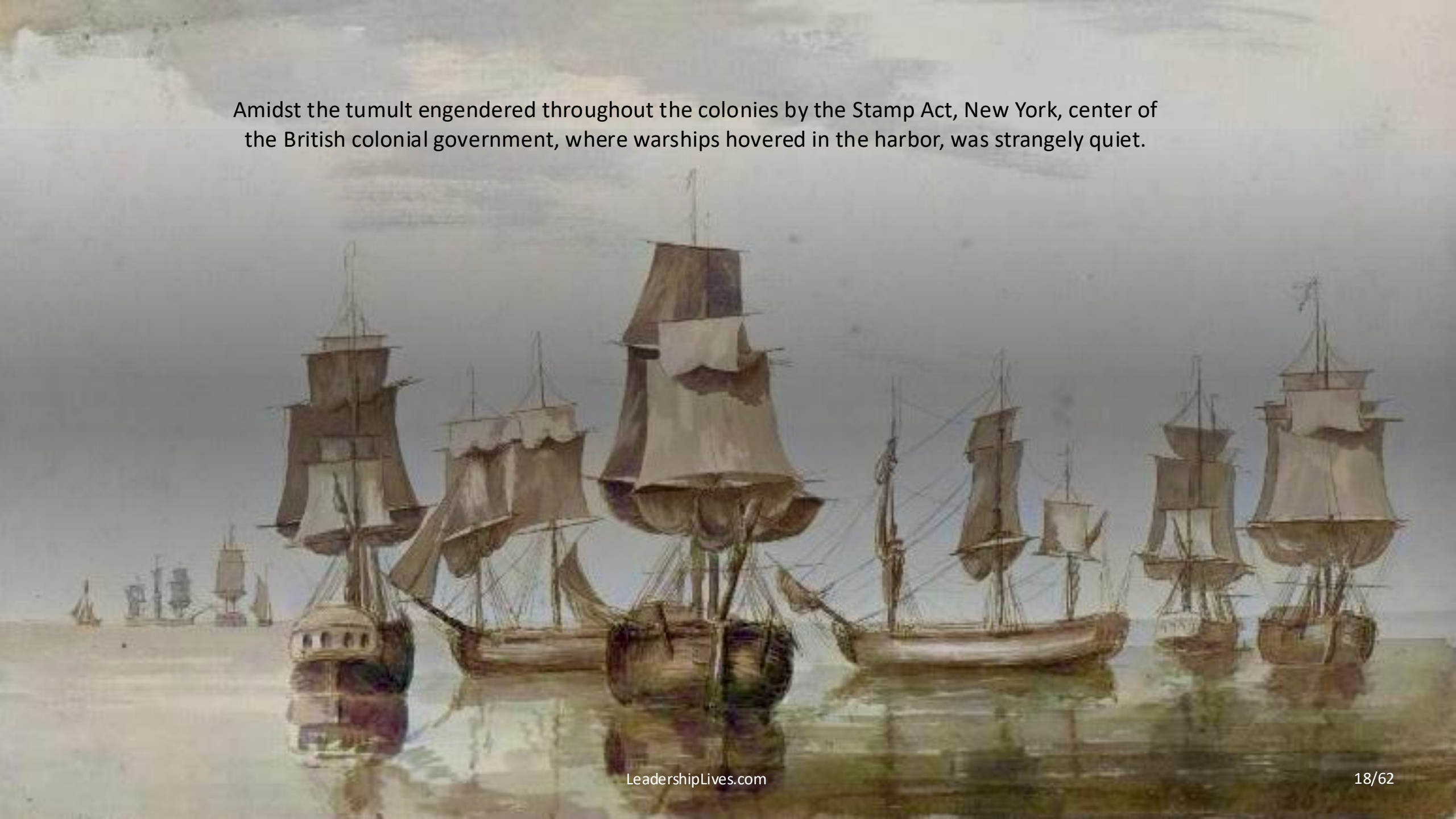
From the moment Sam Adams walked in the door, he was a powerhouse in the Assembly. His only peer was gifted orator, James Otis, who is credited with coining the term, "NO TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION." But where Otis was erratic, Adams was "persistent, undeviating and sanity itself" in the words of biographer, James Hosmer, who added, in speech, Adams was "straightforward and sensible."



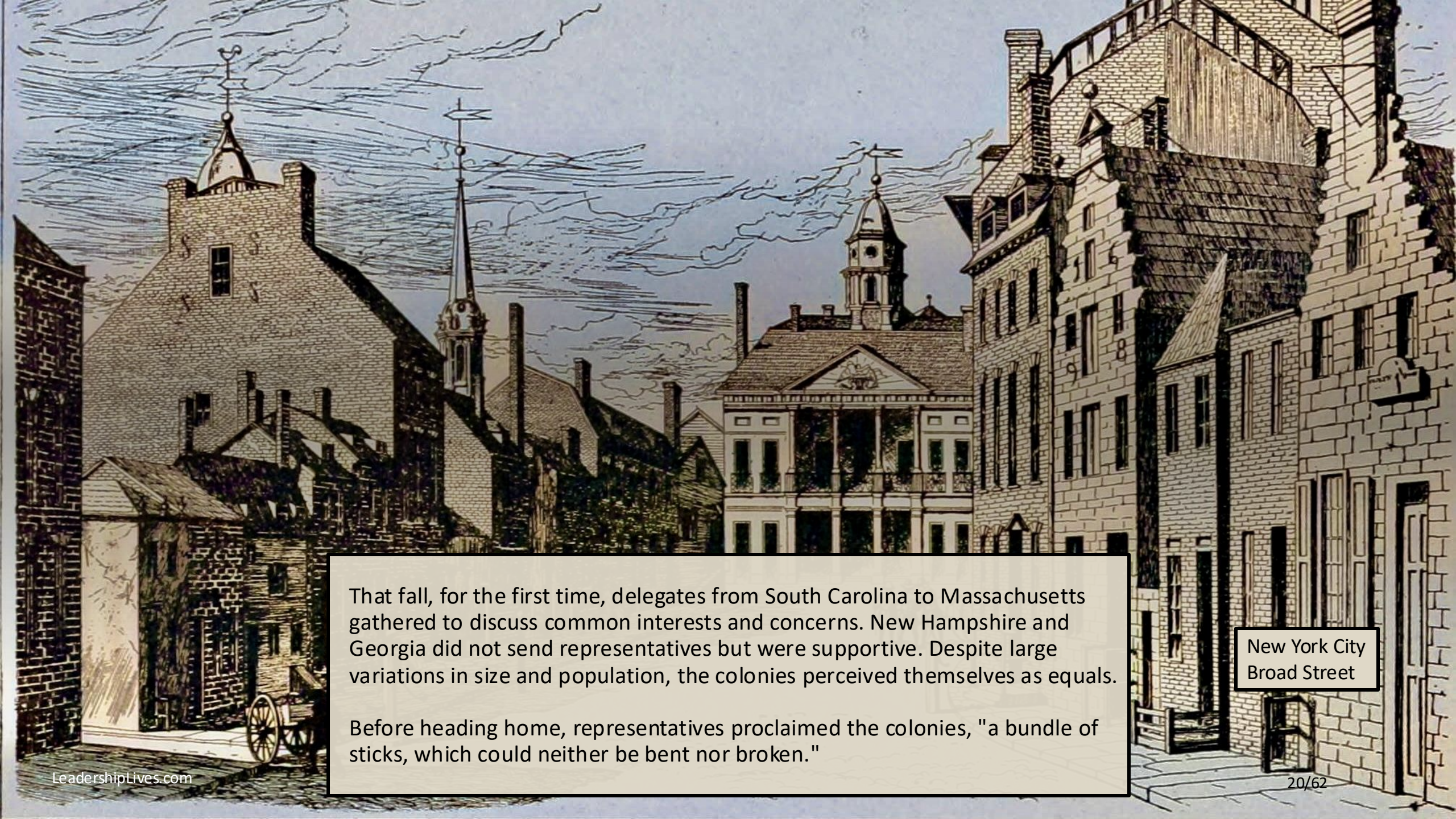
To contain the patriots, loyalist governors would "prorogue," (meaning suspend), sessions of provincial Assemblies but they could not prorogue town meetings.

Sam Adams put the Stamp Act on trial at a Boston town meeting and declared the new tax contrary to British common law.

Amidst the tumult engendered throughout the colonies by the Stamp Act, New York, center of the British colonial government, where warships hovered in the harbor, was strangely quiet.



Then, in late September, a New York City newspaper resurrected Benjamin Franklin's 1754 design to endorse the principle of forming a union. Franklin's motto "JOIN OR DIE" became the rallying cry throughout the colonies.



That fall, for the first time, delegates from South Carolina to Massachusetts gathered to discuss common interests and concerns. New Hampshire and Georgia did not send representatives but were supportive. Despite large variations in size and population, the colonies perceived themselves as equals.

Before heading home, representatives proclaimed the colonies, "a bundle of sticks, which could neither be bent nor broken."

New York City
Broad Street

For nine tumultuous years, from 1760 – 1769, Francis Bernard served as Royal Governor of Massachusetts. His years in office were bookended by Thomas Hutchinson who served as acting governor and later as governor.

Like Hutchinson, Bernard maintained Parliament made the laws and it was useless to resist.

While the delegates met in New York, on behalf of members of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, Sam Adams wrote a polite letter to Bernard that questioned the limits of Parliament's rights and notified the governor that the Assembly would not assist in implementing the Stamp Act.

Then Adams wrote for "posterity" the Massachusetts Resolves - a statement on "the just rights of His Majesty's subjects."

Francis Bernard

In March 1766, Parliament rescinded the Stamp Act but refused to back down on the principle of taxing the colonists.

In May 1767, Parliament announced the Townshend Acts to tax glass, paper, painters' colors and tea. The Acts also established a board of commissioners in Boston to oversee trade, legalized general writs of assistance, and suspended New York's legislature for refusing to provide housing for British soldiers.

In early 1768, in response to the Townshend Acts, Adams wrote a courteous but adamant letter, to George III, asserting that "imposing duties on the people of this province, with the sole and express purpose of raising a revenue, are infringements of their natural and constitutional rights..."

The Massachusetts Assembly voted to use the only weapon they had available - boycott British goods.

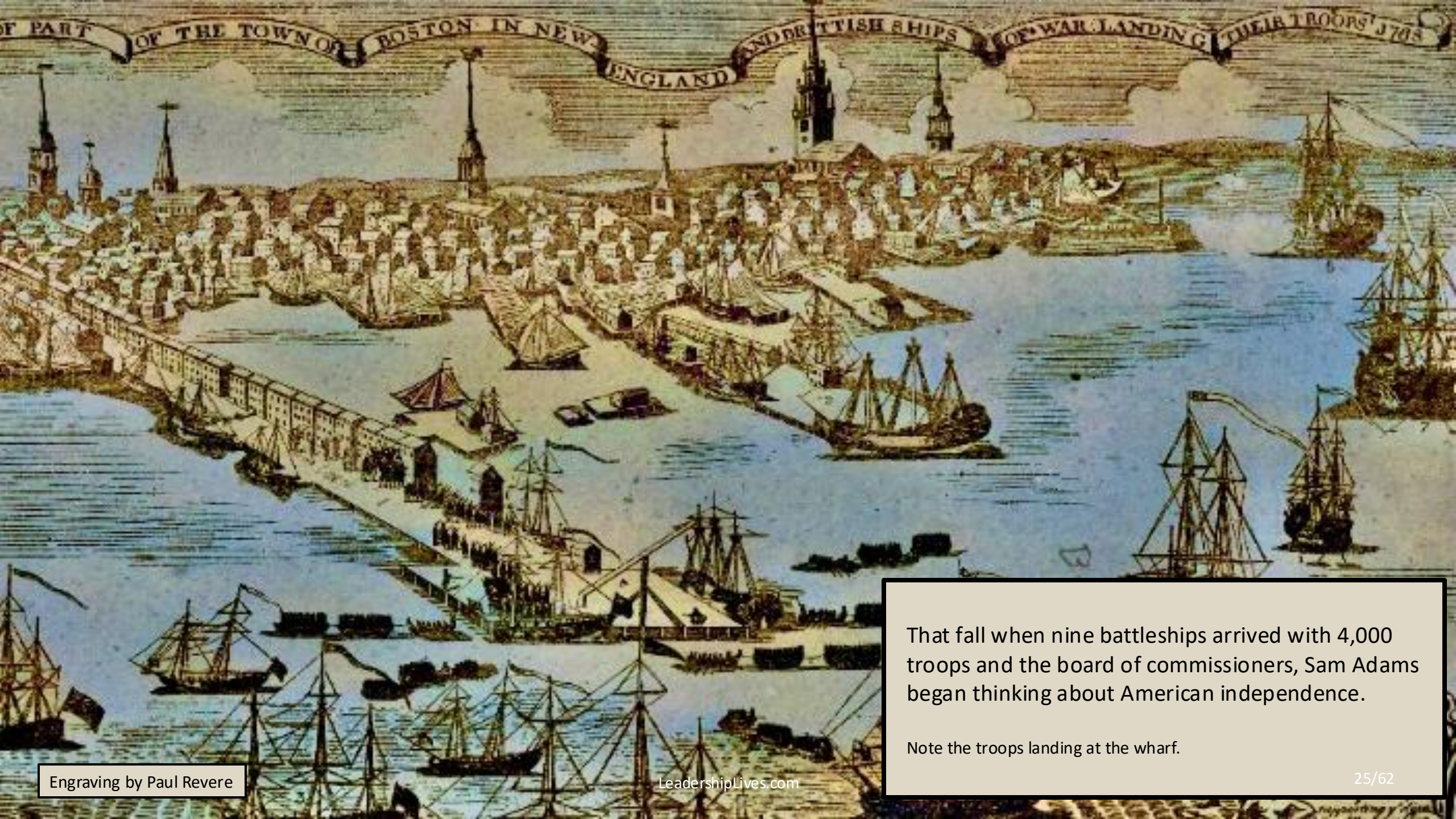
When Governor Bernard directed the Assembly to repeal their vote to boycott British goods, the Massachusetts Legislature voted 92 – 17 against.

In honor of the patriots' staunch stand, fifteen members of the SONS OF LIBERTY commissioned Paul Revere to create THE LIBERTY BOWL.

The bowl is inscribed,

"To the Memory of the glorious NINETY-TWO . . . who, undaunted by the insolent Menaces of Villains in Power from a Strict Regard to Conscience, and the LIBERTIES of their Constituents, on the 30th of June 1768 Voted NOT TO RESCIND."

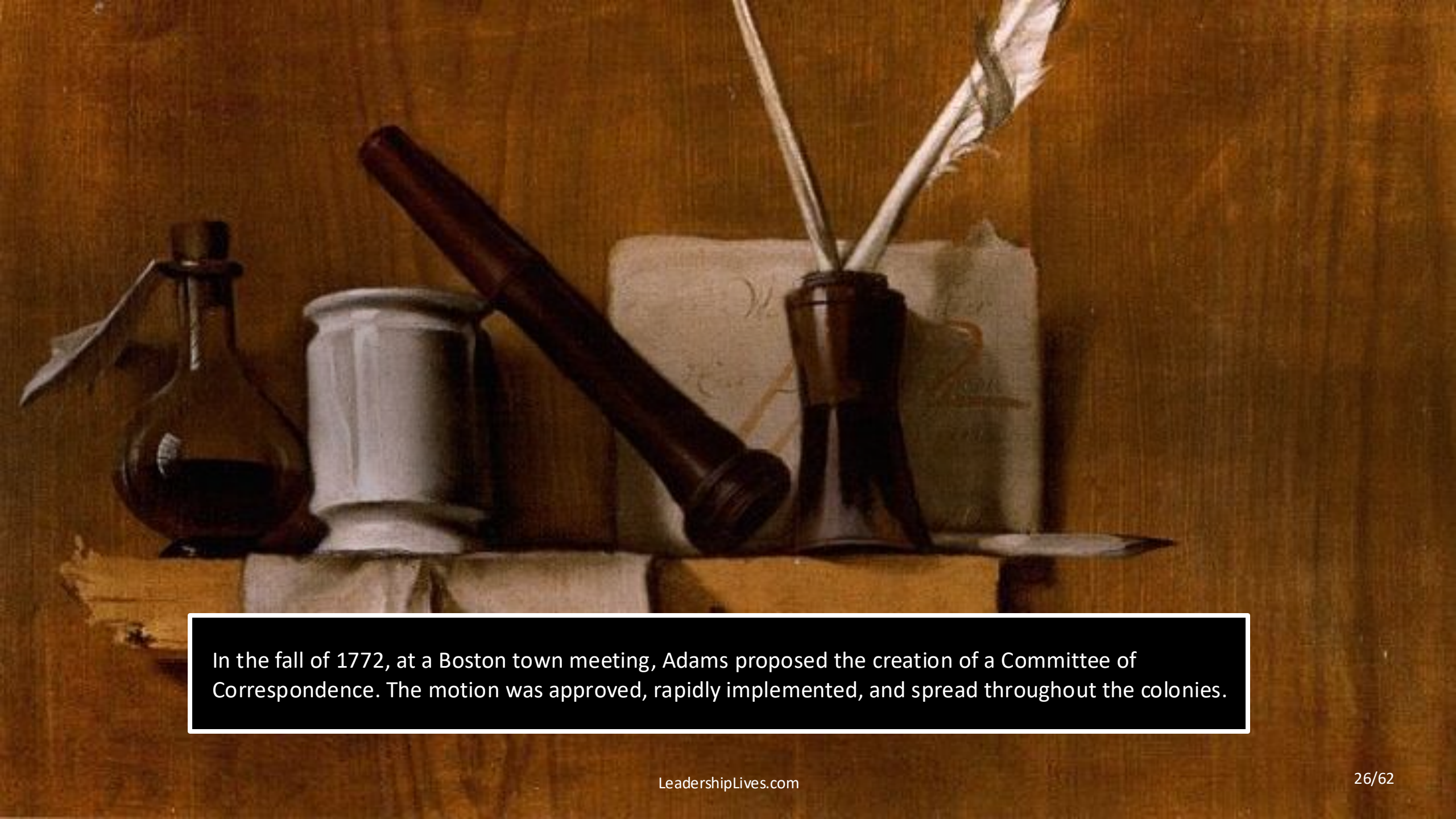
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Behind the bowl, John Singleton Copley's portrait of Paul Revere. On the left, Copley's portraits of Samuel Adams, John Hancock and Joseph Warren.



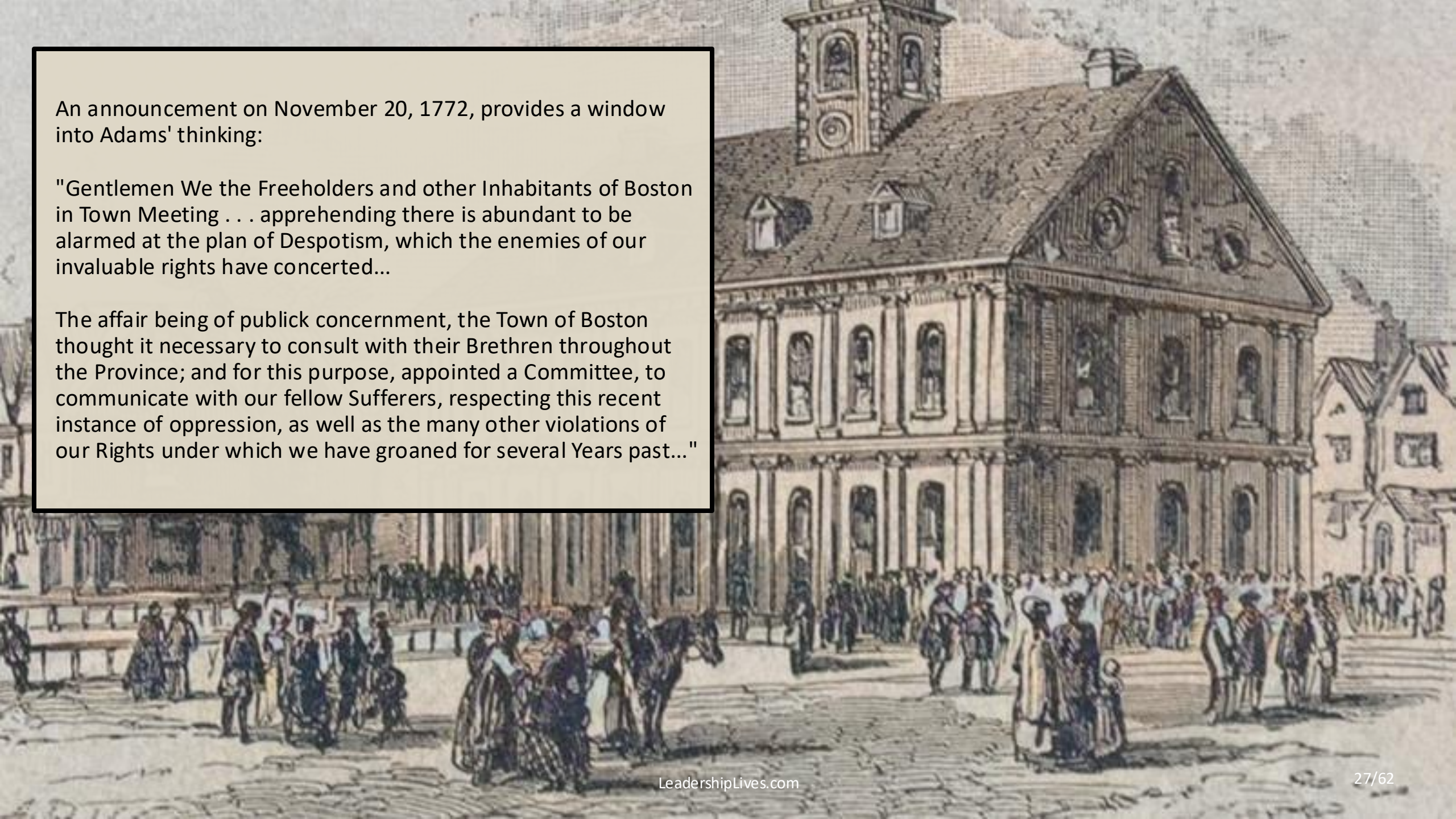
That fall when nine battleships arrived with 4,000 troops and the board of commissioners, Sam Adams began thinking about American independence.

Note the troops landing at the wharf.

Engraving by Paul Revere



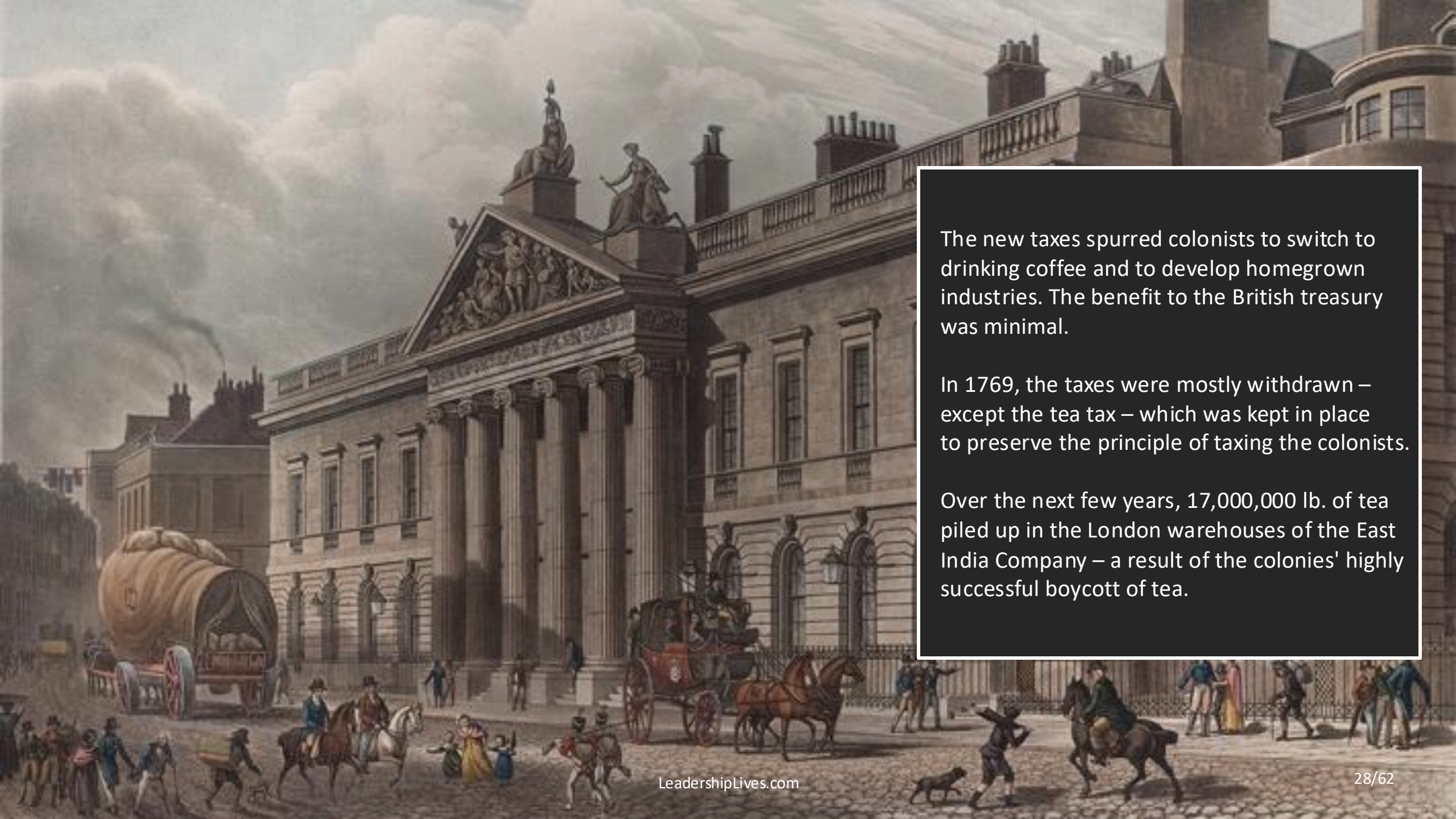
In the fall of 1772, at a Boston town meeting, Adams proposed the creation of a Committee of Correspondence. The motion was approved, rapidly implemented, and spread throughout the colonies.



An announcement on November 20, 1772, provides a window into Adams' thinking:

"Gentlemen We the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of Boston in Town Meeting . . . apprehending there is abundant to be alarmed at the plan of Despotism, which the enemies of our invaluable rights have concerted…

The affair being of publick concernment, the Town of Boston thought it necessary to consult with their Brethren throughout the Province; and for this purpose, appointed a Committee, to communicate with our fellow Sufferers, respecting this recent instance of oppression, as well as the many other violations of our Rights under which we have groaned for several Years past…"



The new taxes spurred colonists to switch to drinking coffee and to develop homegrown industries. The benefit to the British treasury was minimal.

In 1769, the taxes were mostly withdrawn – except the tea tax – which was kept in place to preserve the principle of taxing the colonists.

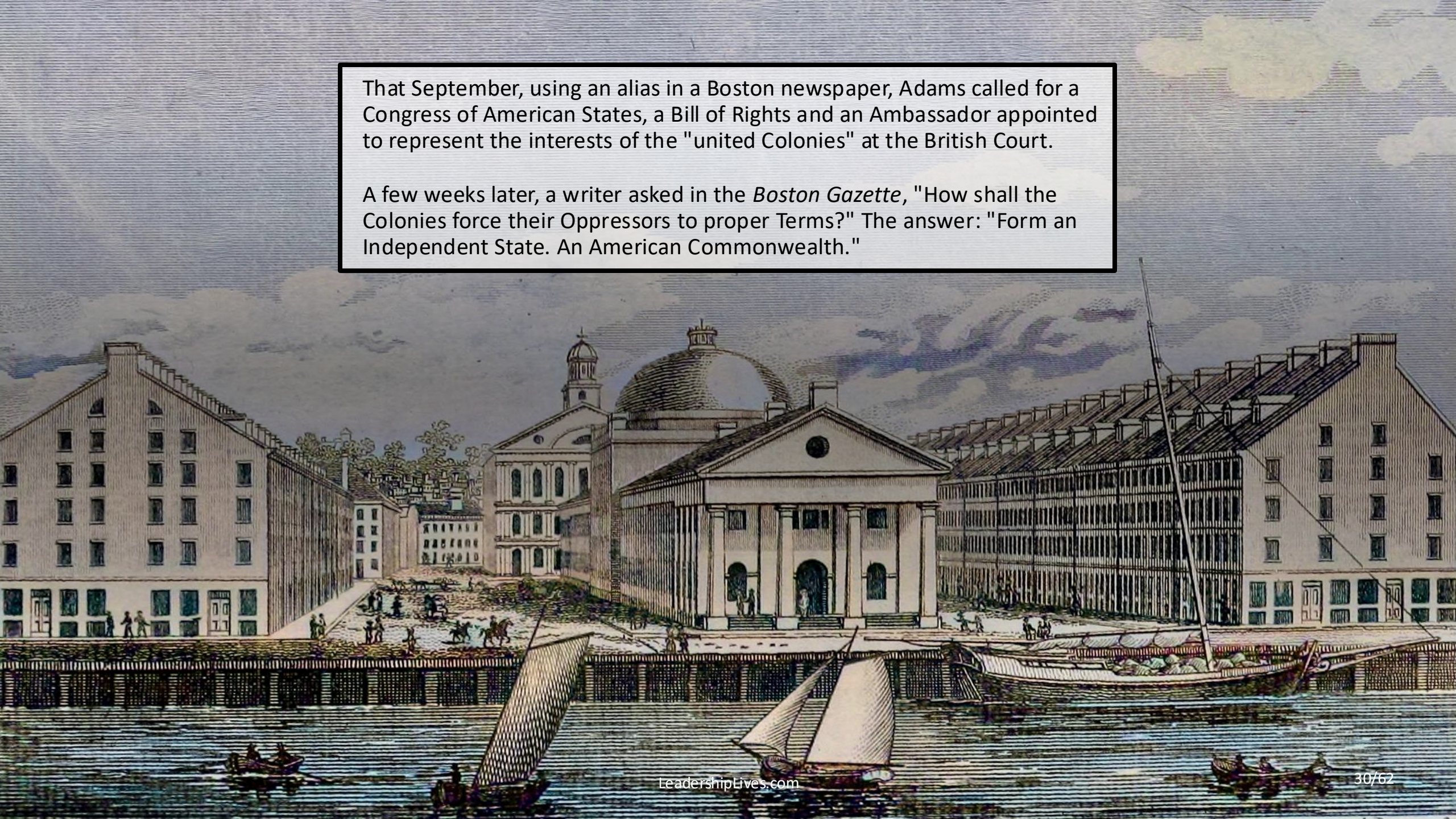
Over the next few years, 17,000,000 lb. of tea piled up in the London warehouses of the East India Company – a result of the colonies' highly successful boycott of tea.

Throughout the colonies, women – "Daughters of Liberty "- signed petitions promising not to drink tea.

At the time, both export and import duties were imposed on goods. To help the faltering East India Company, Parliament dropped the export tax They still maintained the right to tax colonists.

In the summer of 1773, British Prime Minister Lord Frederick North overruled concerns of East India Company executives and ignored warnings from Americans. He ordered ships loaded with tea to sail for Boston and other colonial ports.

1775 British cartoon: Women of Edenton, NC signing a petition "not to Conform to that Pernicious Custom of Drinking Tea."



That September, using an alias in a Boston newspaper, Adams called for a Congress of American States, a Bill of Rights and an Ambassador appointed to represent the interests of the "united Colonies" at the British Court.

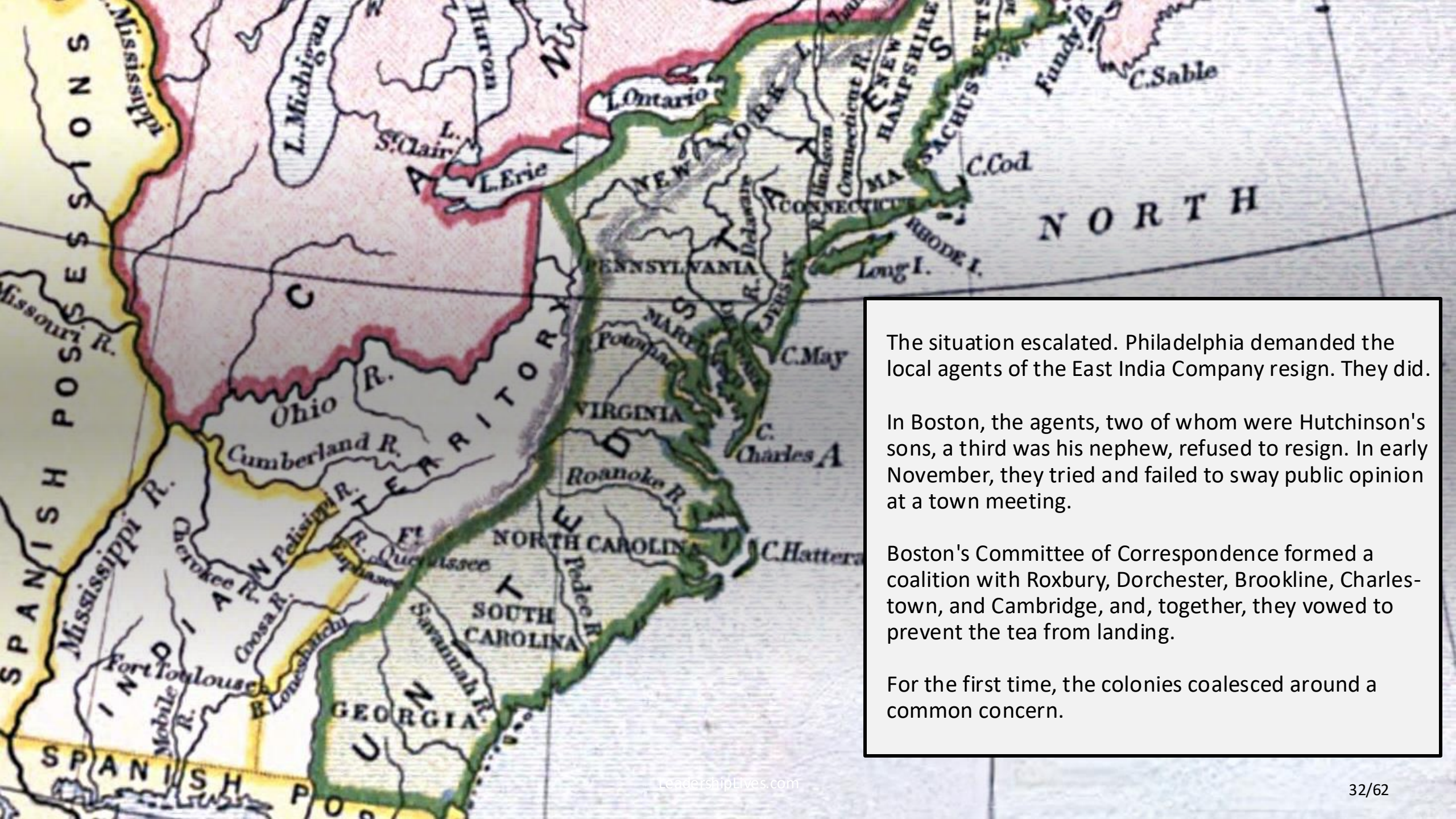
A few weeks later, a writer asked in the *Boston Gazette*, "How shall the Colonies force their Oppressors to proper Terms?" The answer: "Form an Independent State. An American Commonwealth."

Thomas Hutchinson, ca. 1750

Thomas Hutchinson reported to colonial secretary, Lord Dartmouth, that at Boston's town meetings, Adams, ". . . originates his measures, which are followed by the rest of the towns, and, of course, are adopted or justified by the Assembly."

A descendant of early settlers, Hutchinson served as a selectman, representative, judge, Speaker of the House, lieutenant governor and governor.

When Hutchinson was asked why he did not bribe Adams, he replied, "Such is the obstinacy and inflexible disposition of the man, that he can never be conciliated by any office or gift whatever."

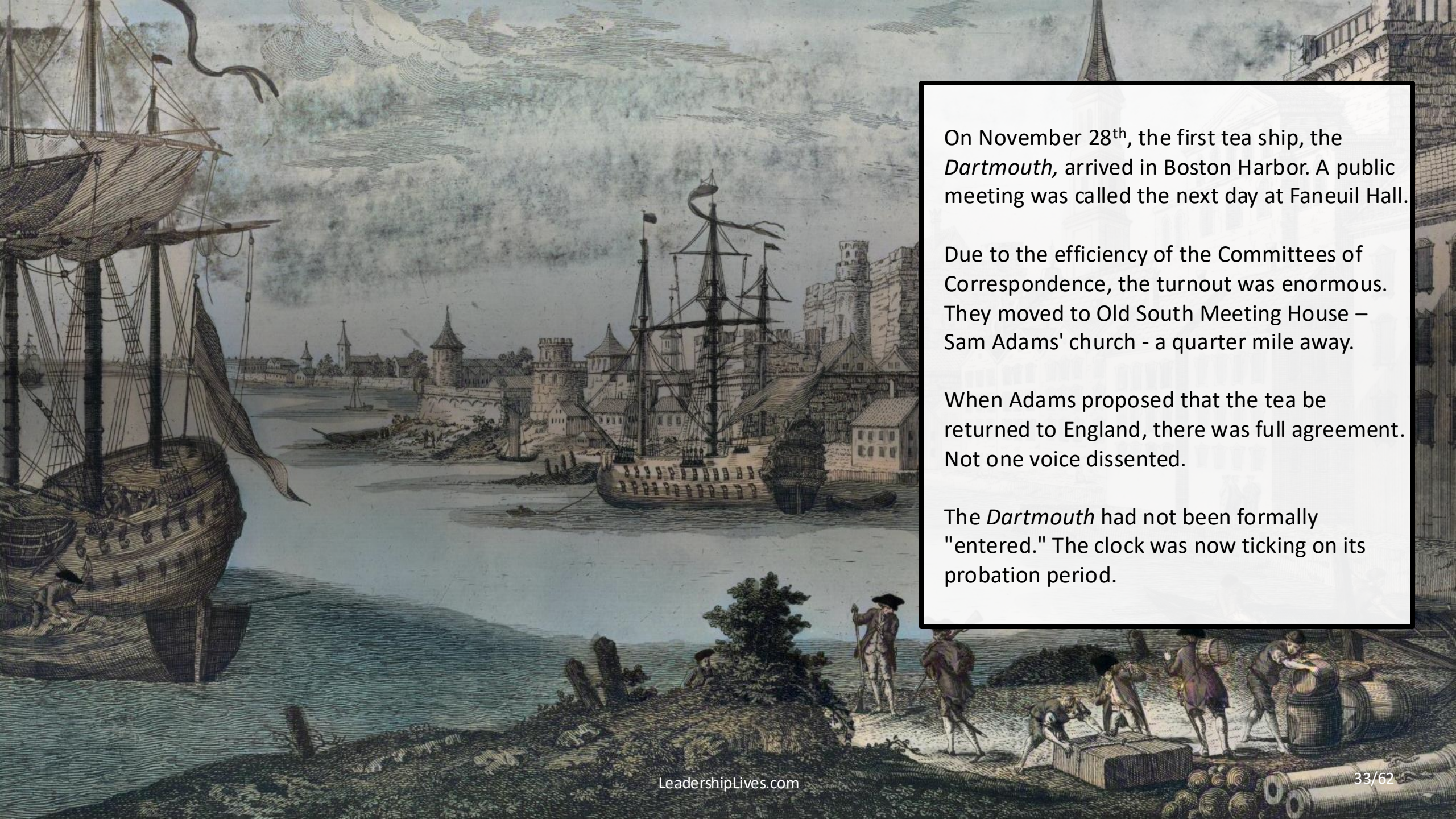


The situation escalated. Philadelphia demanded the local agents of the East India Company resign. They did.

In Boston, the agents, two of whom were Hutchinson's sons, a third was his nephew, refused to resign. In early November, they tried and failed to sway public opinion at a town meeting.

Boston's Committee of Correspondence formed a coalition with Roxbury, Dorchester, Brookline, Charles-town, and Cambridge, and, together, they vowed to prevent the tea from landing.

For the first time, the colonies coalesced around a common concern.



On November 28th, the first tea ship, the *Dartmouth,* arrived in Boston Harbor. A public meeting was called the next day at Faneuil Hall.

Due to the efficiency of the Committees of Correspondence, the turnout was enormous. They moved to Old South Meeting House – Sam Adams' church - a quarter mile away.

When Adams proposed that the tea be returned to England, there was full agreement. Not one voice dissented.

The *Dartmouth* had not been formally "entered." The clock was now ticking on its probation period.

On December 16th, time ran out.

According to the revenue laws, the cargo now had to be confiscated. Custom officials could not, or would not, grant a clearance.

The British fleet sat in the Harbor prepared to sink any ship that attempted to sail without the proper paperwork. Only the governor could overrule the laws.

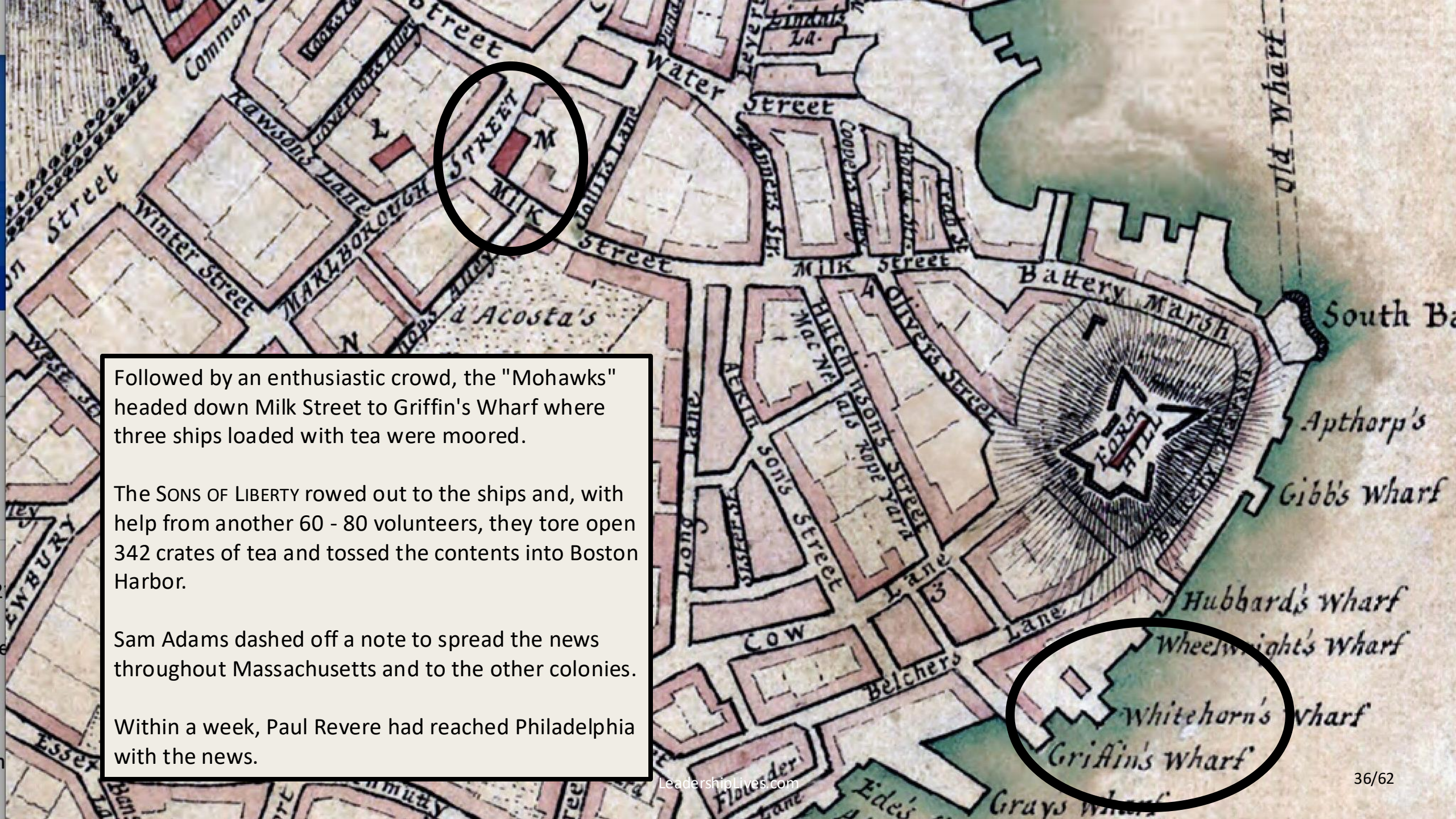
To protect himself from an unruly mob, Hutchinson was at his country estate in Milton, 10 miles away.

An unheard-of crowd of 7,000 filled Old South to overflowing and jammed the surrounding streets.

Shortly after 6 p.m., the ship's owner appeared and announced the governor, who he had just met with in Milton, would not grant the permits required for the ship to sail.

The meeting's moderator, Sam Adams, declared: "This meeting can do nothing more to save the country." His statement was a pre-arranged cue.

60 members of the SONS OF LIBERTY disguised as "Mohawks," shouted war whoops, and headed for the doors.

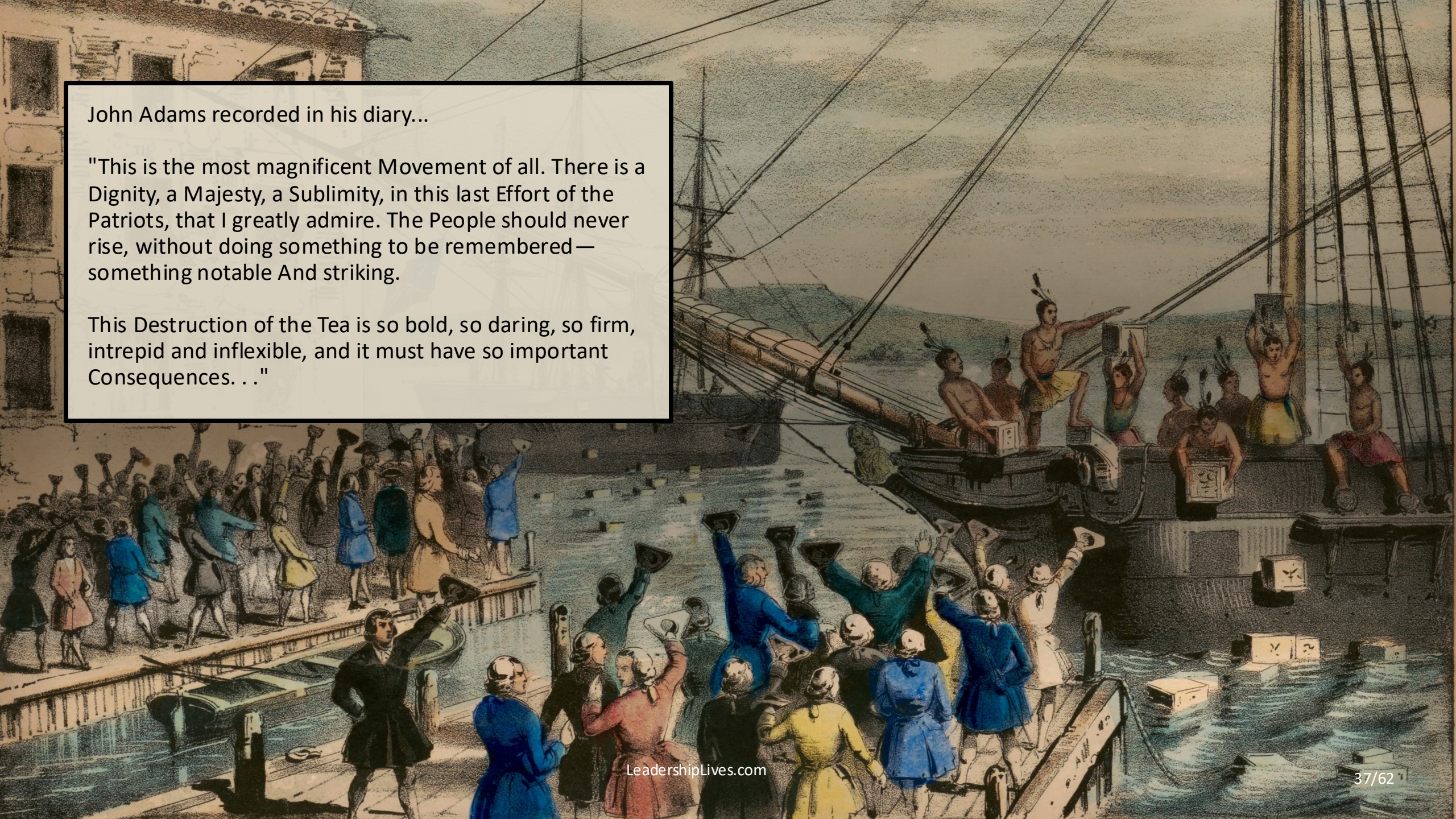


Followed by an enthusiastic crowd, the "Mohawks" headed down Milk Street to Griffin's Wharf where three ships loaded with tea were moored.

The SONS OF LIBERTY rowed out to the ships and, with help from another 60 - 80 volunteers, they tore open 342 crates of tea and tossed the contents into Boston Harbor.

Sam Adams dashed off a note to spread the news throughout Massachusetts and to the other colonies.

Within a week, Paul Revere had reached Philadelphia with the news.



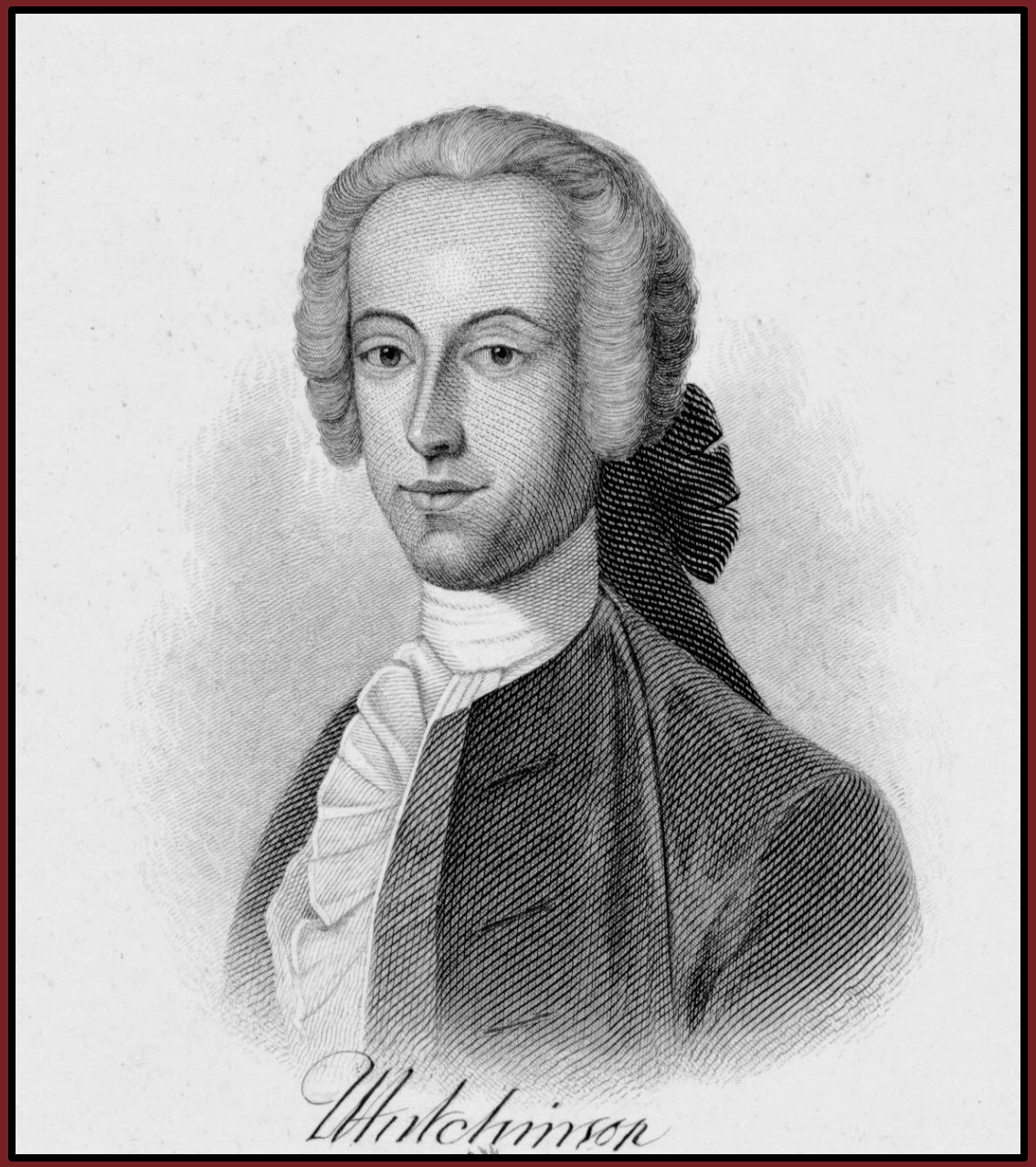
John Adams recorded in his diary...

"This is the most magnificent Movement of all. There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity, in this last Effort of the Patriots, that I greatly admire. The People should never rise, without doing something to be remembered—something notable And striking.

This Destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences. . ."

The great 19th century historian, George Bancroft, wrote, "Samuel Adams was in his glory. He had led his native town to offer itself cheerfully as a sacrifice for the liberties of mankind."

The Royal government had collapsed. The Boston Committee of Correspondence had become the de facto government.

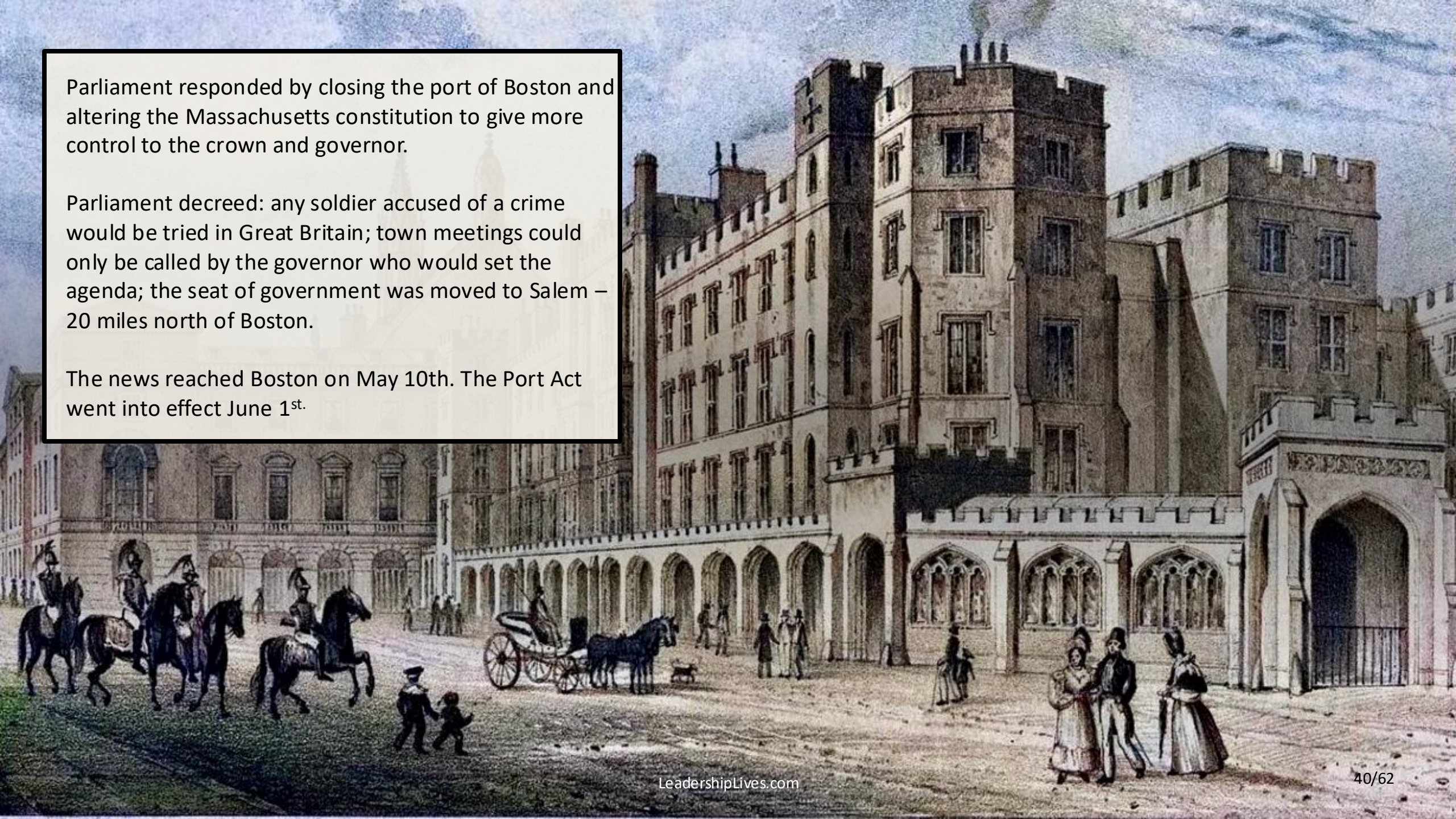


Governor Hutchinson wrote later,

"This was the boldest stroke which had yet been struck in America."

". . . The leaders feared no consequences. And it is certain that ever after this time an opinion was easily instilled and was constantly increasing, that the body of the people had also gone too far to recede, and that an open and general revolt must be the consequence; and it was not long before actual preparations were visibly making for it in most parts of the Province."

Governor Hutchinson's *History of Massachusetts Bay*, Vol. 3.
Quoted by James K. Hosmer in *Samuel Adams*.



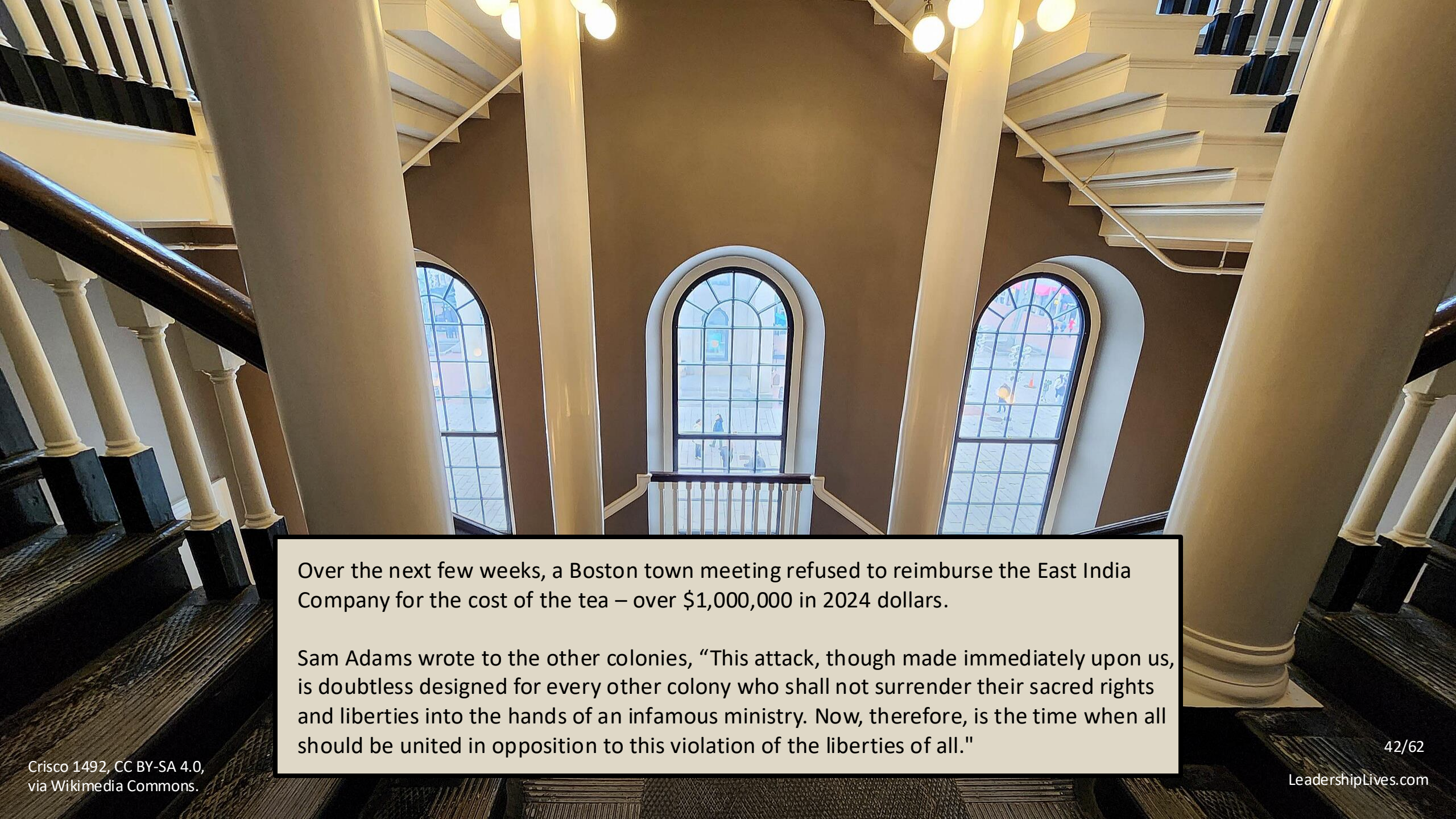
Parliament responded by closing the port of Boston and altering the Massachusetts constitution to give more control to the crown and governor.

Parliament decreed: any soldier accused of a crime would be tried in Great Britain; town meetings could only be called by the governor who would set the agenda; the seat of government was moved to Salem – 20 miles north of Boston.

The news reached Boston on May 10th. The Port Act went into effect June 1st.

At his request, Governor Hutchinson was relieved of his role. He was replaced by General Gage, the senior military leader in the colonies. Gage arrived in Boston on May 17th.

Hutchinson sailed for England on June 1st and spent the rest of his life in an unhappy exile. He wrote, "I had rather die in a little country farm-house in New England, than in the best nobleman's seat in Old England, and have therefore given no ear to any proposal of settling here." He died in England in 1780.



Over the next few weeks, a Boston town meeting refused to reimburse the East India Company for the cost of the tea – over $1,000,000 in 2024 dollars.

Sam Adams wrote to the other colonies, “This attack, though made immediately upon us, is doubtless designed for every other colony who shall not surrender their sacred rights and liberties into the hands of an infamous ministry. Now, therefore, is the time when all should be united in opposition to this violation of the liberties of all."

Again, the Committees of Correspondence proved invaluable. Preliminary plans came together quickly for a Continental Congress to meet in Philadelphia in September.

The Liberty Tree
Boston, MA

On June 17, 1774, 129 members of the Massachusetts Legislature assembled at the Salem courthouse. They had no idea what was about to happen.

By the time the Royal Secretary arrived to prorogue the Assembly, Sam Adams had locked the door and had the key in his pocket.

In rapid succession, Thomas Cushing Jr., Robert Treat Paine, James Bowdoin, John Adams and Samuel Adams were elected delegates to the Continental Congress. Funds were approved to cover expenses. Circulars were ordered to notify the other colonies.

The room was in an uproar.

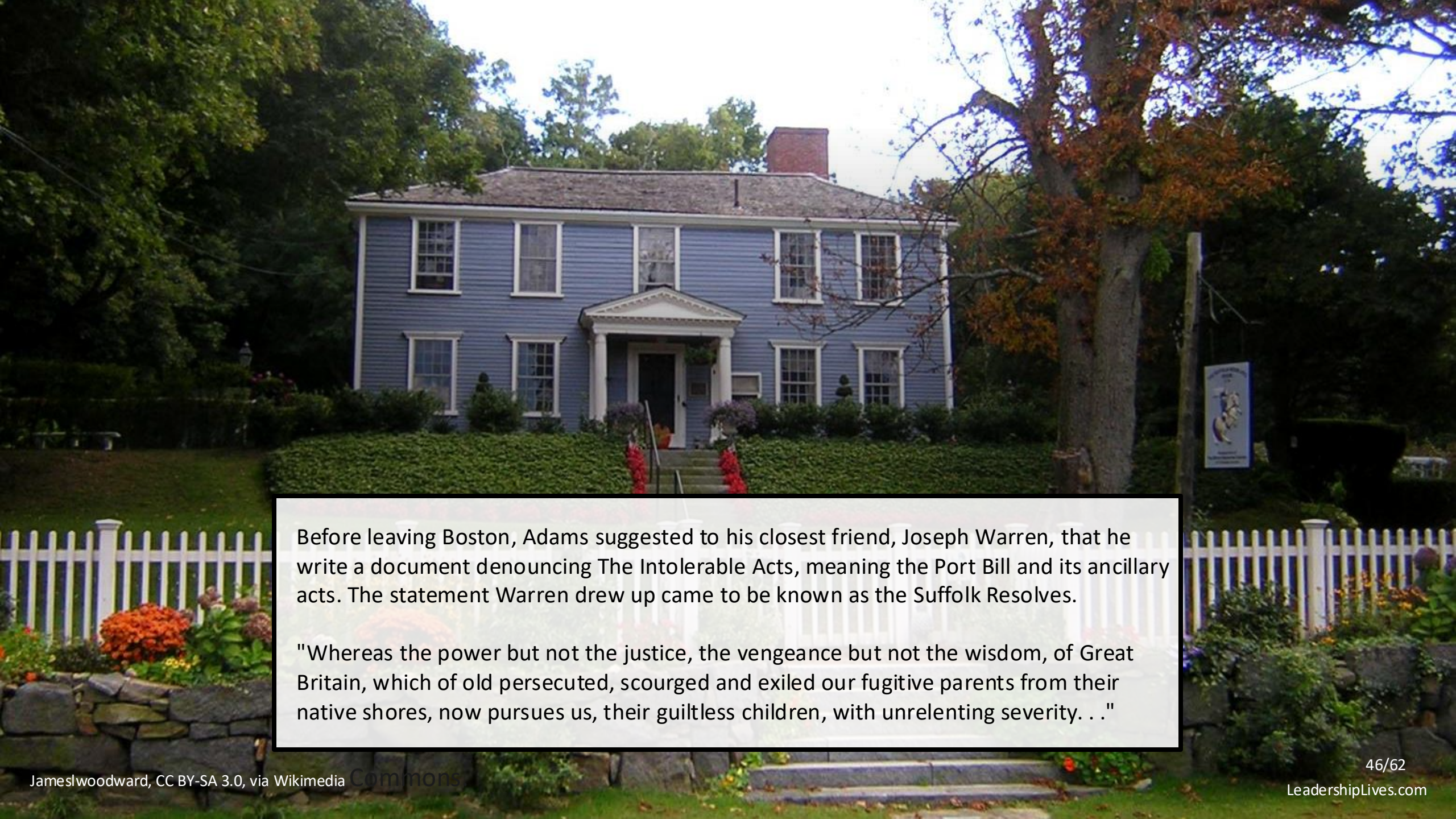
Courthouse, Salem, MA

Before Adams set off for the First Continental Congress, anonymous well wishers had him fitted out with a new suit, a new wig, a hat, plenty of silk stockings and six pairs of shoes.

Another urged on Adams some much-needed funds.

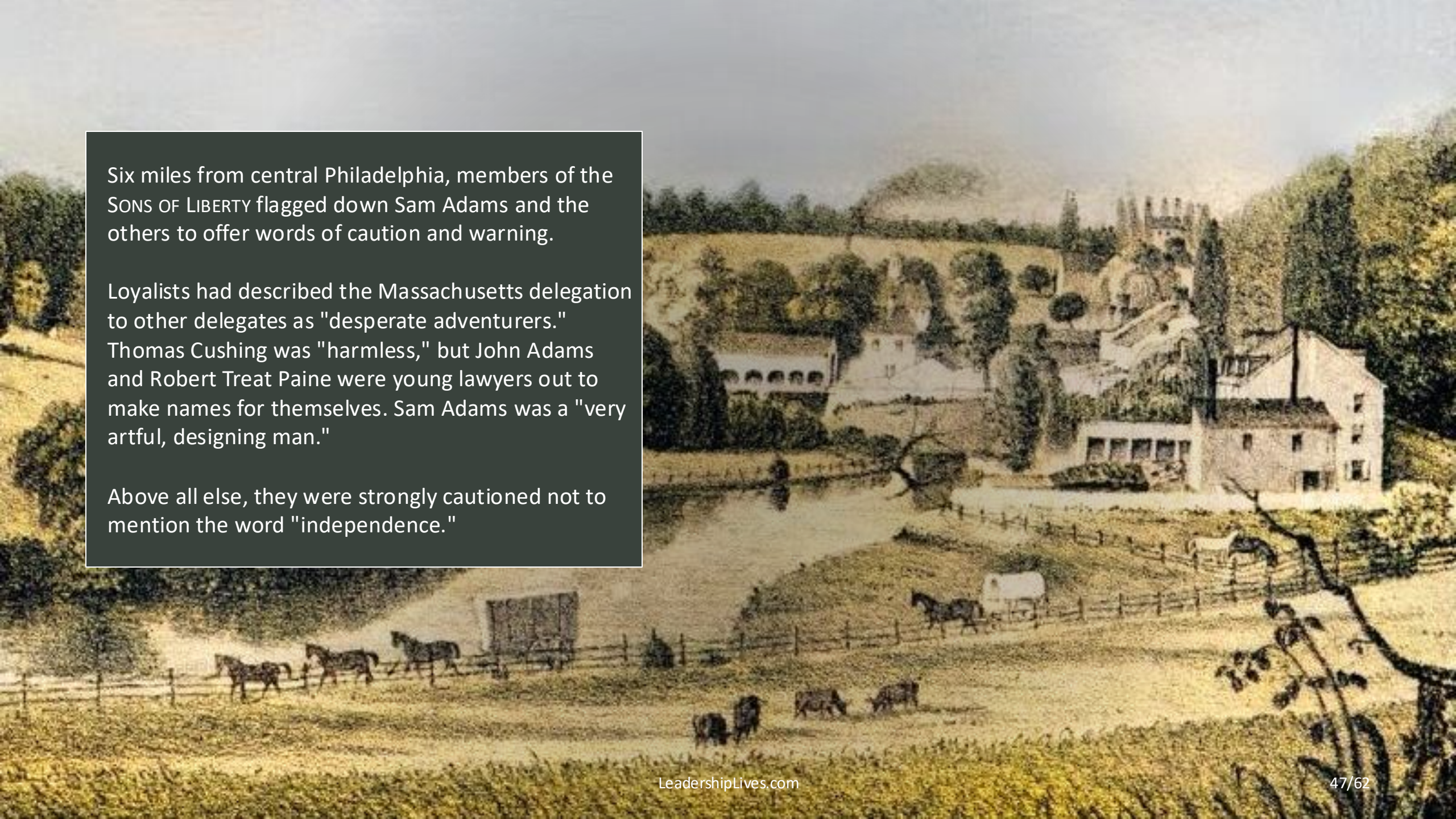
Over the years, a neighbor had insisted on building a new barn to replace one that was falling down. Another neighbor firmly offered to make necessary repairs to his house.

With the other delegates, except James Bowdoin whose wife was sick, on August 10th, Adams set out on the three-week trip to Philadelphia.



Before leaving Boston, Adams suggested to his closest friend, Joseph Warren, that he write a document denouncing The Intolerable Acts, meaning the Port Bill and its ancillary acts. The statement Warren drew up came to be known as the Suffolk Resolves.

"Whereas the power but not the justice, the vengeance but not the wisdom, of Great Britain, which of old persecuted, scourged and exiled our fugitive parents from their native shores, now pursues us, their guiltless children, with unrelenting severity. . ."



Six miles from central Philadelphia, members of the SONS OF LIBERTY flagged down Sam Adams and the others to offer words of caution and warning.

Loyalists had described the Massachusetts delegation to other delegates as "desperate adventurers." Thomas Cushing was "harmless," but John Adams and Robert Treat Paine were young lawyers out to make names for themselves. Sam Adams was a "very artful, designing man."

Above all else, they were strongly cautioned not to mention the word "independence."

In Philadelphia, the 53 delegates held their first meeting at a tavern. The Society of Carpenters stepped forward and offered the use of their recently completed hall.

Paul Revere arrived with the Suffolk Resolves on September 16th. The following day the document – a precursor to the Declaration of Independence - was read to Congress and received with great approval.

The Resolves called for a boycott of British goods and urged each colony to organize and train a militia. When Congress endorsed the Suffolk Resolves, John Adams called it "One of the happiest days of my life."

Delegates wrote a conciliatory letter to George III seeking repeal of The Townshend Acts and reconciliation. The letter was ignored in London. In Benjamin Franklin's words, it was overlooked in a "great Heap of letters." Only Edmund Burke, "a friend of America," recognized the conflict had escalated.

In January 1775, Parliament declared Massachusetts was in a state of rebellion.

Sam Adams sent an undercover agent to Canada to assess interest in aligning with the colonies. The agent found the Canadians "lukewarm at best."

In mid-February, militias in towns surrounding Boston, were warned to be ready.

That spring, while the Massachusetts Assembly met in Concord, instead of Salem, Adams and Hancock stayed nearby at a Hancock family home in Lexington.

On the night of April 18 – 19, 1775, Paul Revere arrived about midnight to warn that 700 British troops were marching towards Lexington.

Patriots thought the troops intended to capture Adams and Hancock. Instead, the goal was to seize munitions stored in Concord. The armaments had already been moved and hidden.

The British could not arrest Adams. They were wary of triggering a flood of rage among colonists who vastly outnumbered British forces.

On April 19, 1775, as a Minute Man at Concord fired the "shot heard round the world," Sam Adams and John Hancock were already on the road to Philadelphia for the Second Continental Congress.

The battles of Lexington and Concord were followed by the Siege of Boston, the Battle at Bunker Hill and the murder of Adams' dearest friend, Joseph Warren, in the closing minutes of the battle. According to rumor, General Gage said that killing Warren was the equivalent of killing 500 colonists.

On May 10, 1775, delegates from twelve colonies gathered at the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia for the Second Continental Congress. They were soon joined by Georgia. Congress remained in session for the next six years, acting as a federal government – raising militias, appointing diplomats and drafting documents.

On June 15, George Washington was nominated by John and Samuel Adams for the role of commander-in-chief.

In August, Sam Adams was entrusted with conveying $500,000 to Boston to cover the expenses of the Army.

Independence Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In January 1776, British expatriate, Thomas Paine captured the hearts and minds of the colonists with the publication of his pamphlet, *Common Sense*.

On the opening day of the Second Continental Congress, the delegates passed a resolution urging any colony with a government that was not inclined toward independence to form one that was.

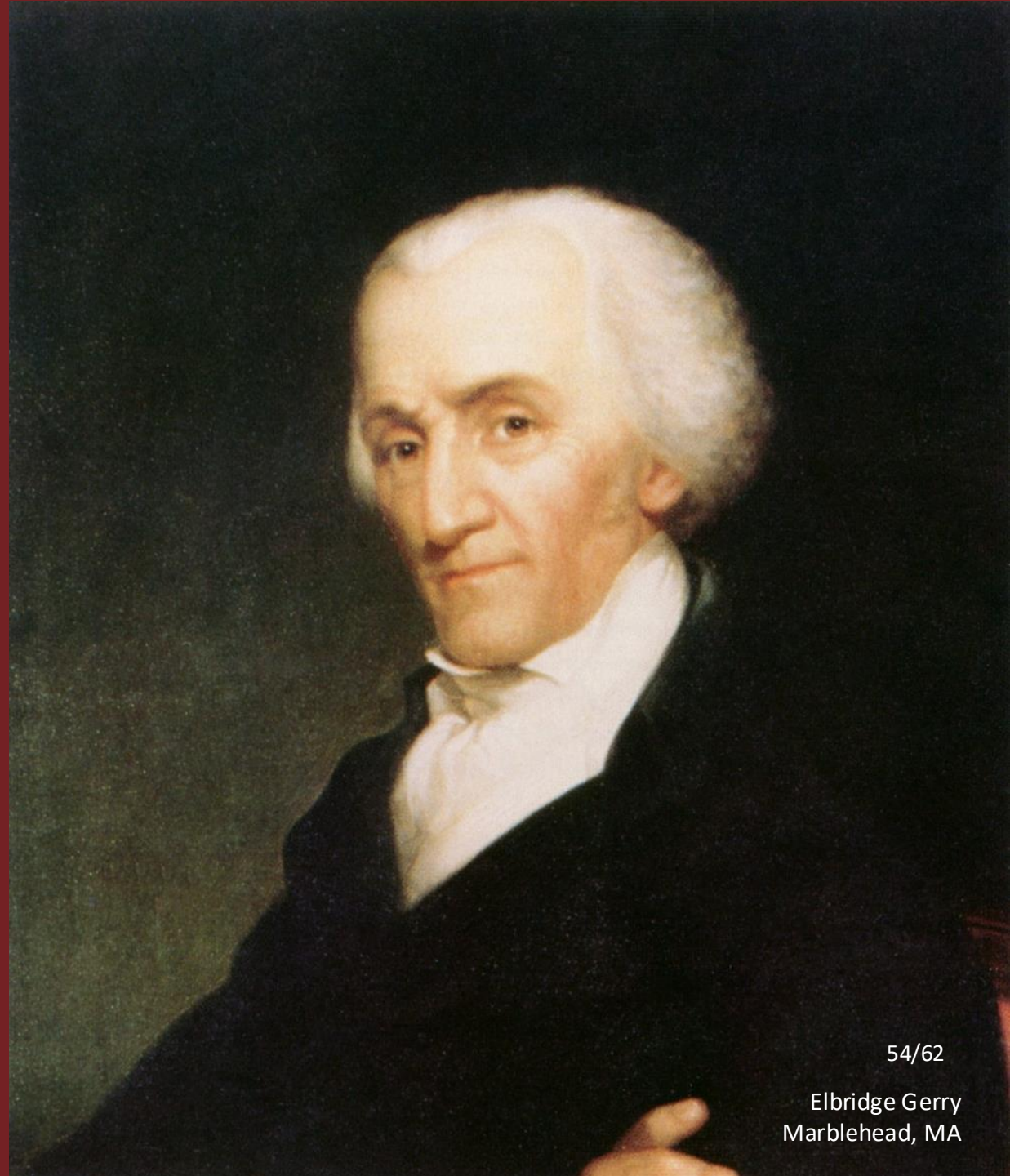
On June 7. 1776, with the backing of fellow Virginians, Richard Henry Lee "Resolved, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown; and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."

On June 8th, the delegates began the debate on Lee's resolution.

Many years later, Massachusetts delegate Elbridge Gerry told Sam Adams' daughter, Hannah Adams Wells, that "the success of Lee's measure was largely due to the 'timely remarks' of her father; that in one speech he occupied an unusually long time, and that two or three wavering members were finally convinced by him."

Gerry was unable to recall the particulars of Adams' speech, but "it struck him as being the ablest effort he had ever heard from Adams."*

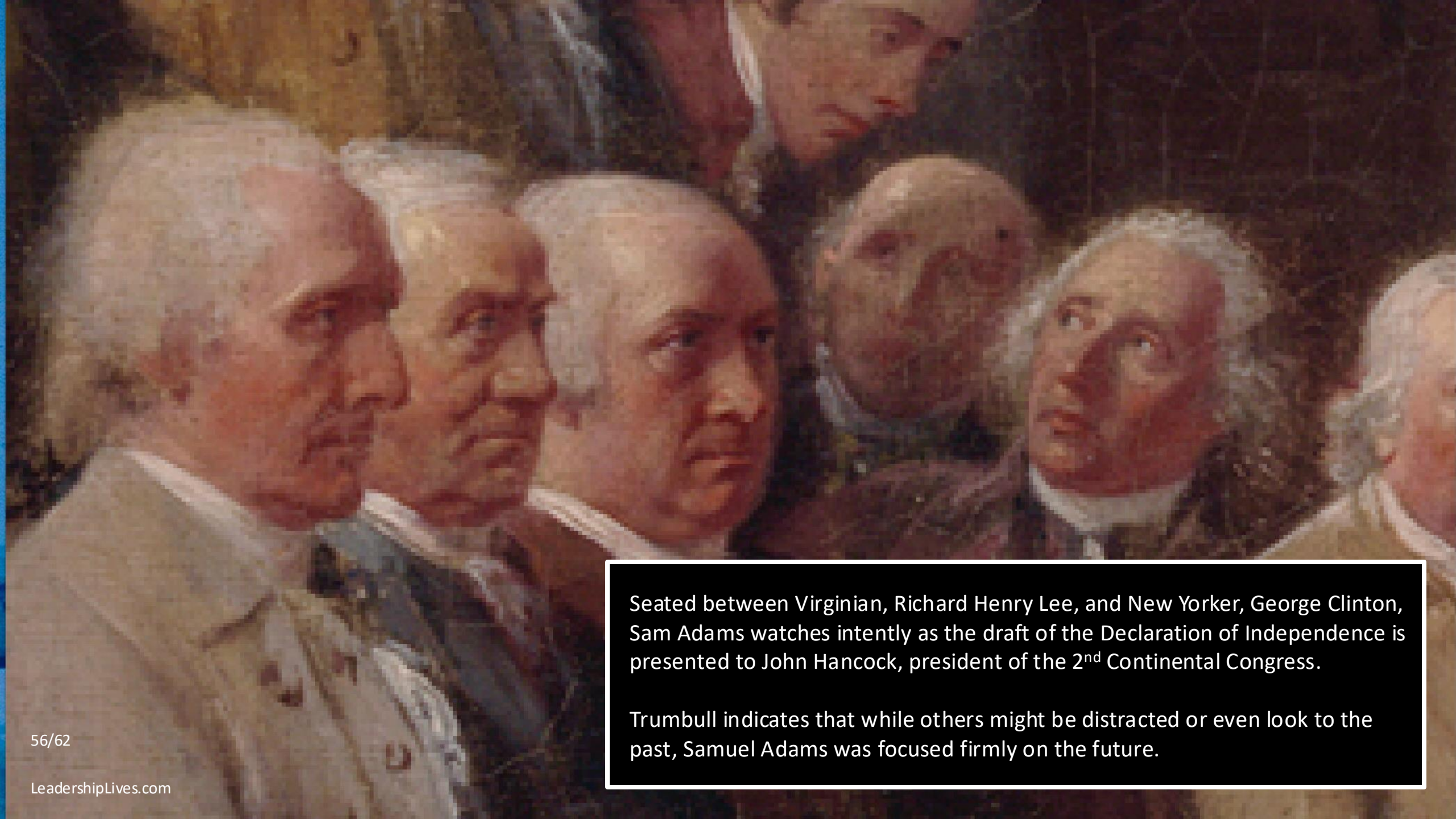
*Wells, William V., *The Life and Public Service of Samuel Adams*, Vol. 2



Elbridge Gerry
Marblehead, MA

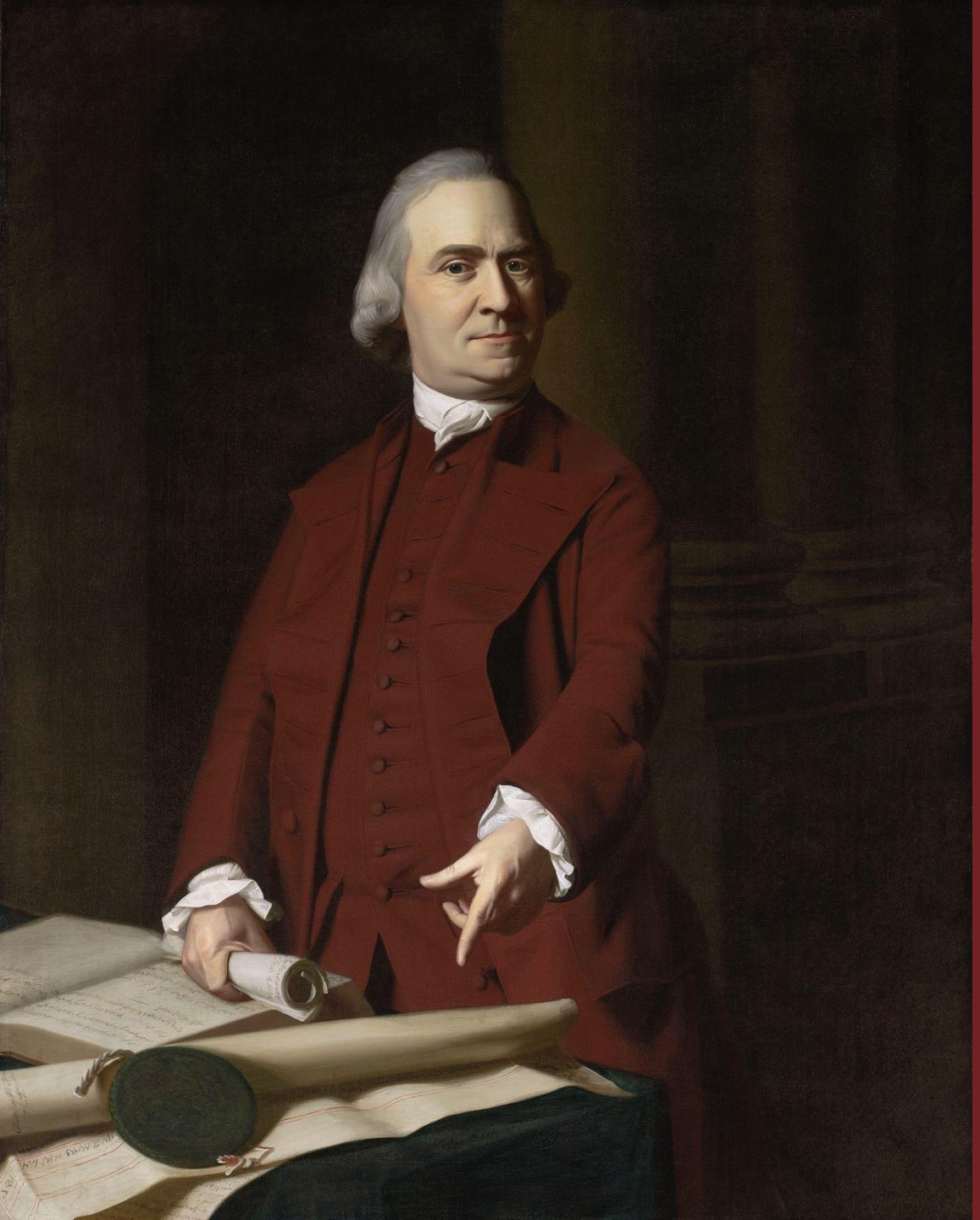
On June 28, 1776, the Committee of Five, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin presented the Declaration of Independence to the whole Congress.

In John Trumbull's painting, Sam Adams looks on from the front row.



Seated between Virginian, Richard Henry Lee, and New Yorker, George Clinton, Sam Adams watches intently as the draft of the Declaration of Independence is presented to John Hancock, president of the 2nd Continental Congress.

Trumbull indicates that while others might be distracted or even look to the past, Samuel Adams was focused firmly on the future.



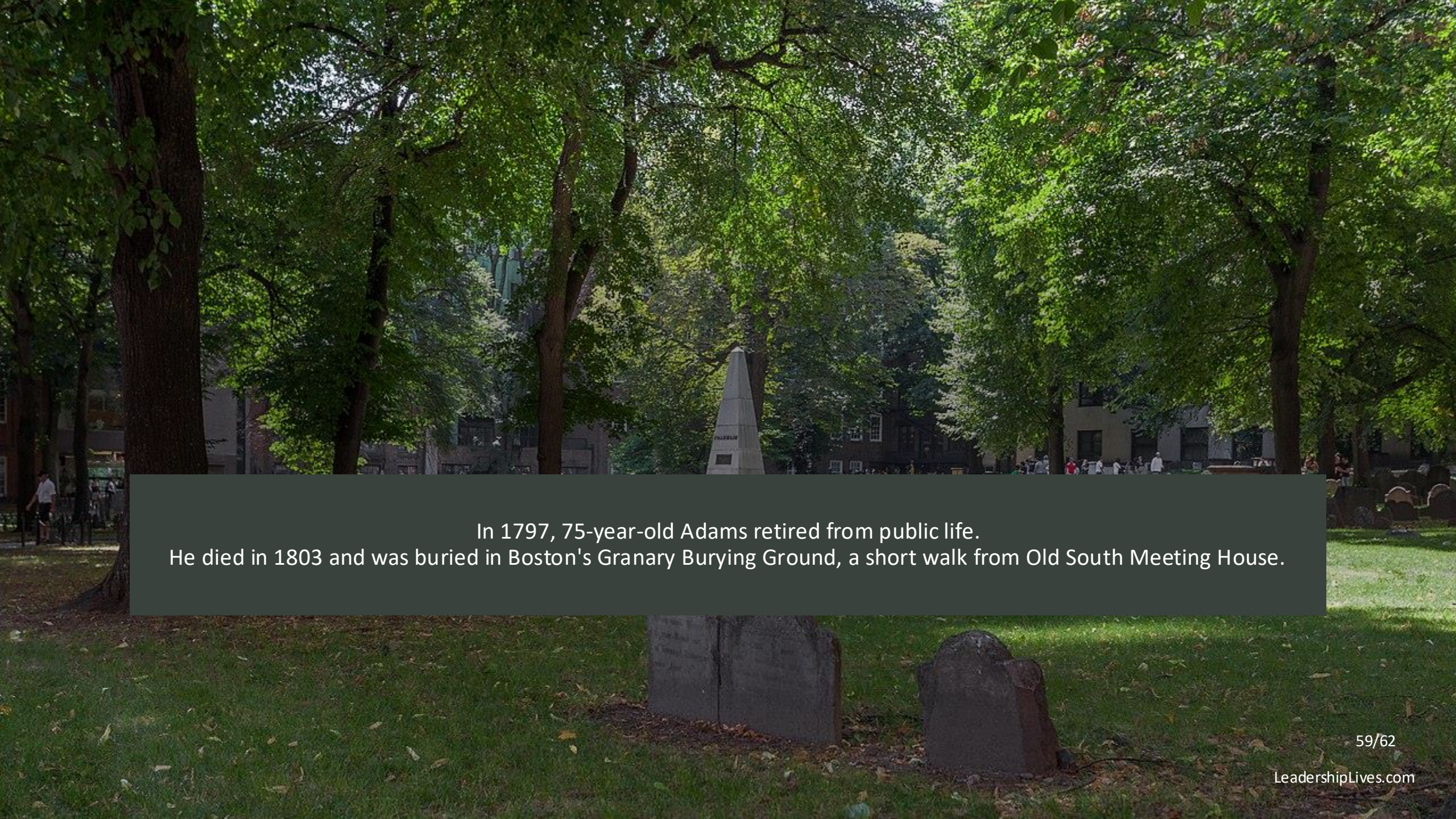
Sam Adams did not emerge from the Revolutionary War unscathed. In March 1776, as the British prepared to evacuate Boston, one of their final acts was to destroy his home. They etched epithets into the window-panes, scrawled ugly cartoons on the walls and emptied the house of its contents. Until repairs could be made, Adams moved his family to Dedham.

Samuel Adams, Jr. served as a physician throughout the war. Bright, sociable, with a big heart, he poured himself into caring for patients. On the battlefield, he contracted tuberculosis and died in 1788 at thirty-seven.

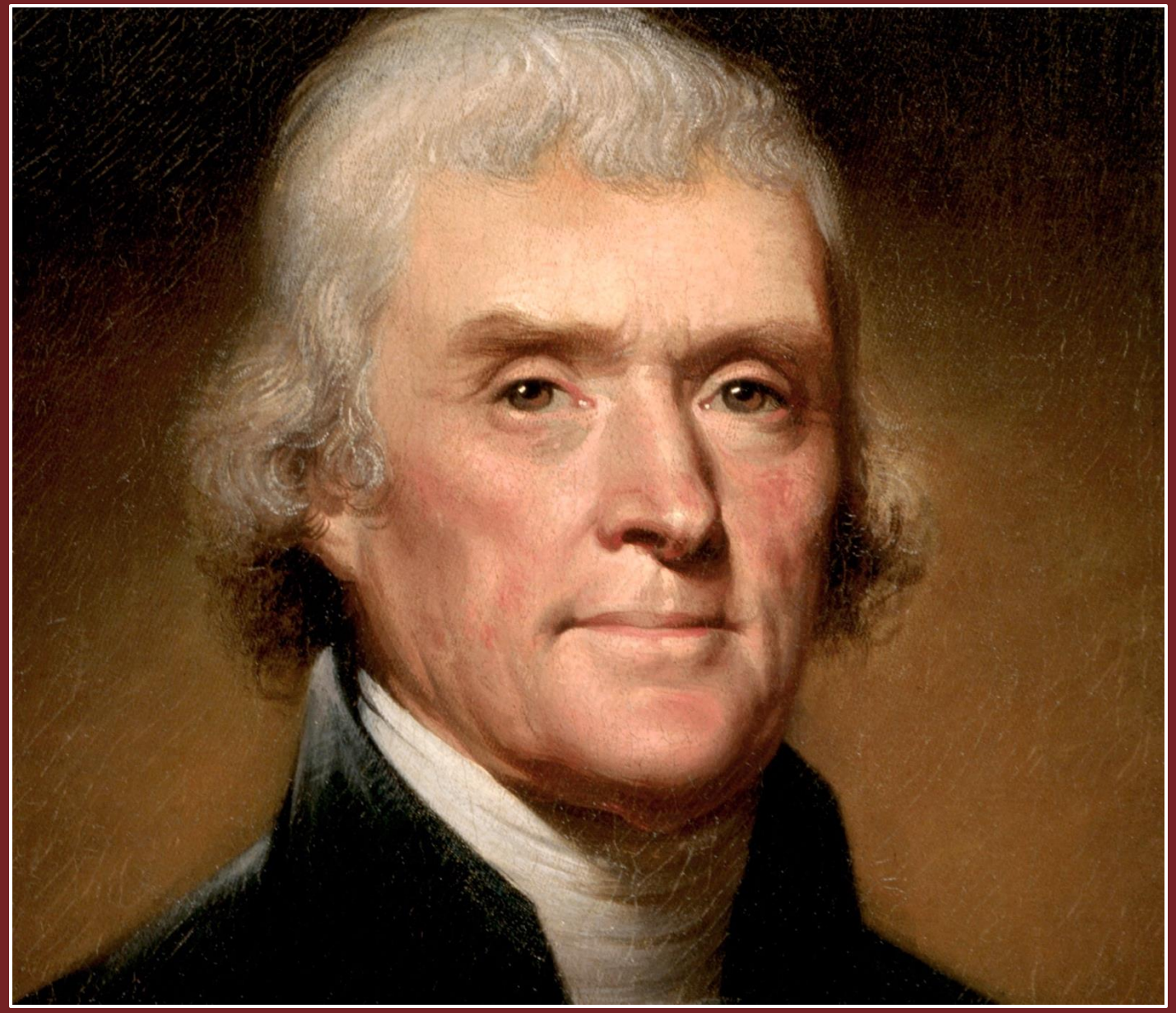
In 1772, John Hancock commissioned John Singleton Copley to paint a portrait of "The Man of the Town Meeting." In the painting, Adams points to the Massachusetts Charter. Contemporaries considered the portrait to be Copley's masterpiece.

In the Second Continental Congress, Adams worked on the Articles of Confederation and served as Chairman of the Committee overseeing the development of the United States Navy.

In 1778, he declined to serve as a delegate again and returned to his beloved Boston to work with John Adams and James Bowdoin on the State's new Constitution. He spent one more year in Philadelphia and then returned to Massachusetts for good. Over the next twenty years, he served as Massachusetts' Secretary of State, as Governor, and laid the cornerstone for the new State House on Beacon Hill.

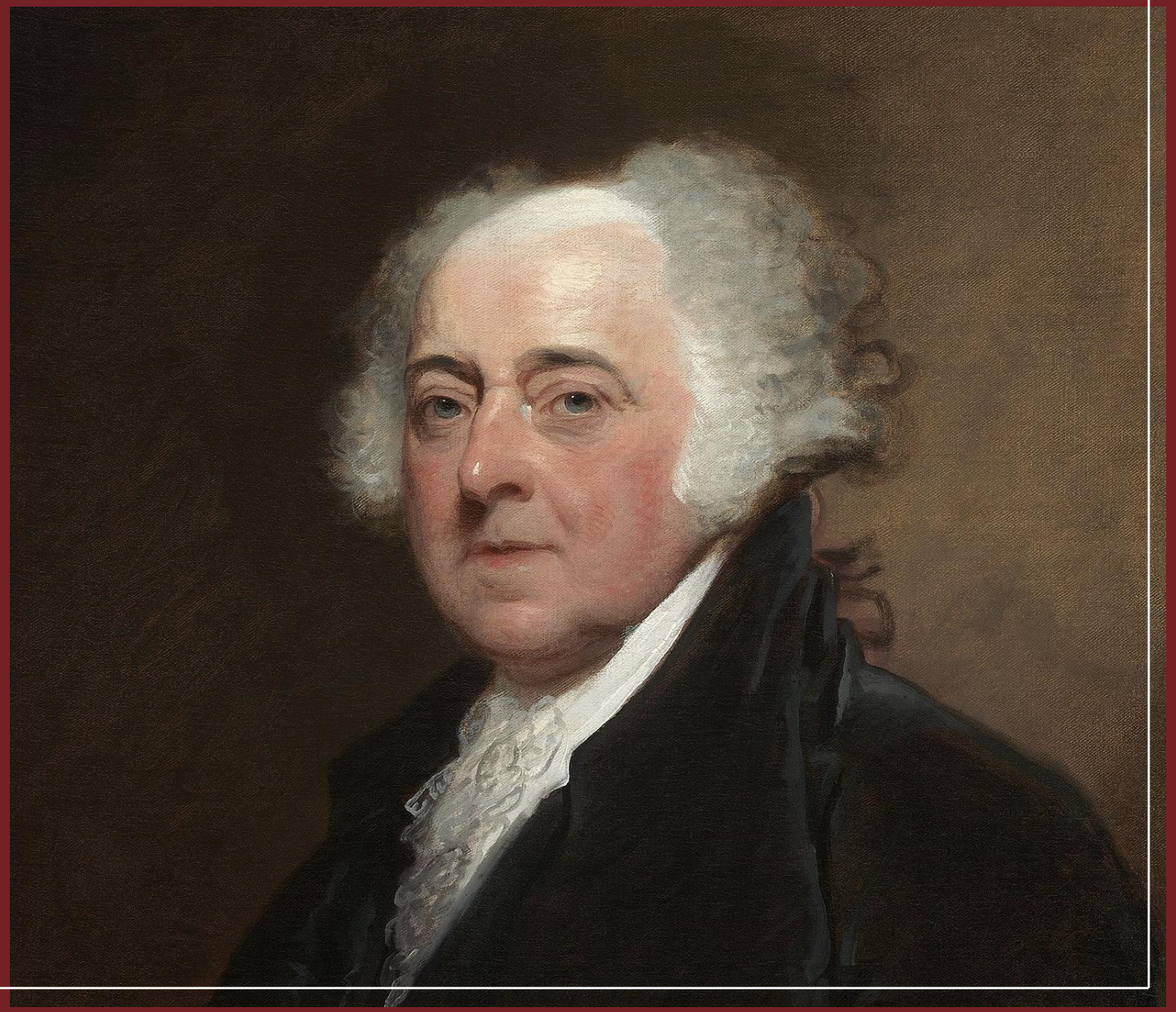


In 1797, 75-year-old Adams retired from public life.
He died in 1803 and was buried in Boston's Granary Burying Ground, a short walk from Old South Meeting House.



"I always considered him (Sam Adams), more than any other member, the fountain of our more important measures."

Thomas Jefferson

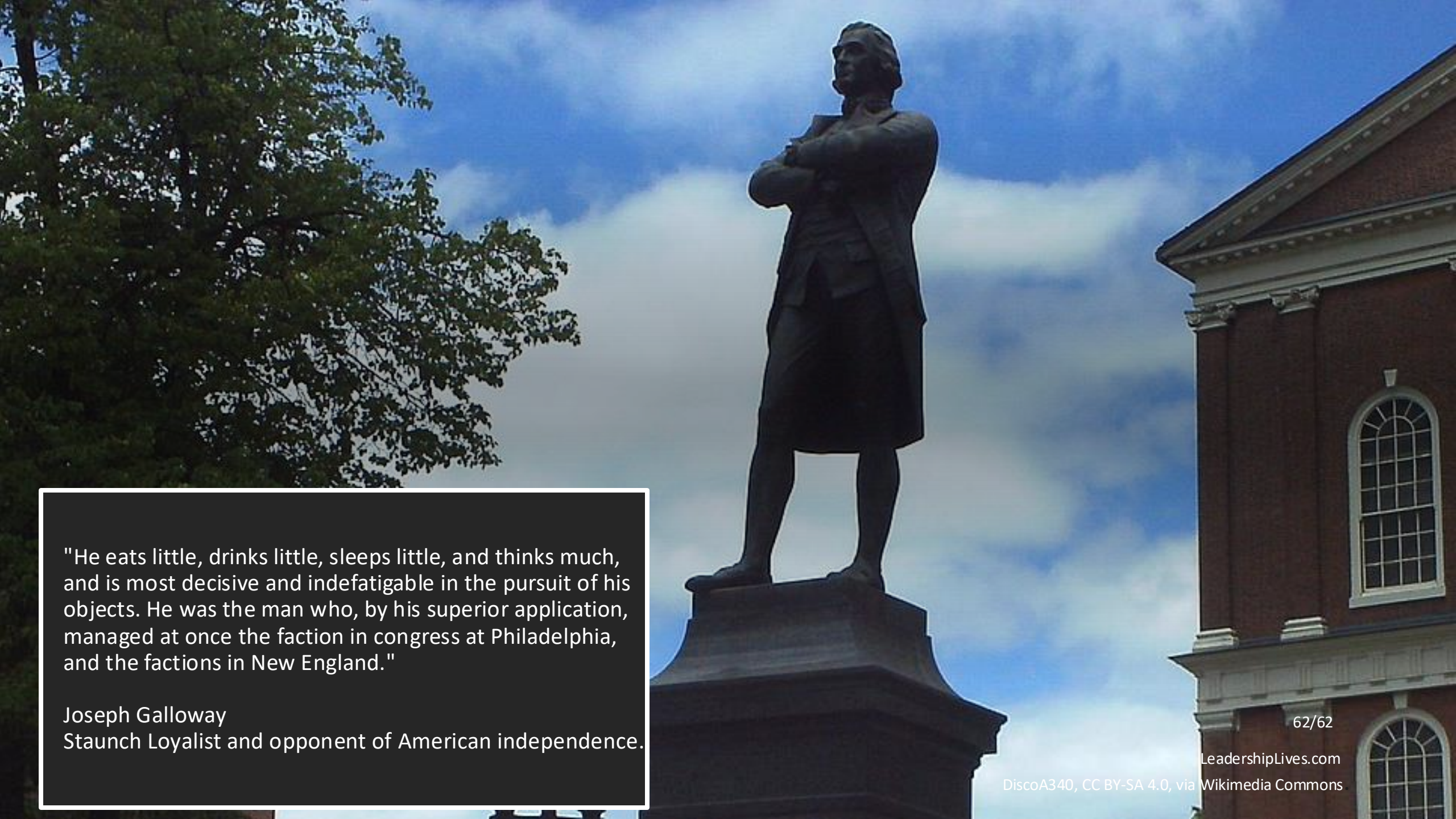


"The talents of that great man (Sam Adams) were of the most exalted, though not of the most-showy kind.

His love of country, his exertions in her service through a long course of years...

his inflexible integrity, his disinterestedness, his invariable resolution, his sagacity, his patience, perseverance, and pure public virtue, were never exceeded by any man in America."

John Adams



"He eats little, drinks little, sleeps little, and thinks much, and is most decisive and indefatigable in the pursuit of his objects. He was the man who, by his superior application, managed at once the faction in congress at Philadelphia, and the factions in New England."

Joseph Galloway
Staunch Loyalist and opponent of American independence.