

William Moulton's Endless Revolution: Deep-Sea Mutiny and Frontier Politics in the Early American Republic

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On December 2, 1822, William Moulton, an aged veteran of the Revolutionary War, sat down in his dilapidated cabin in Wolcott, New York to compose a letter to the Congressional Revolutionary Claims and Pensions Committee inquiring why he had been dropped from the pension list. As he struggled to fight off the early December cold his mind was fired with suspicion. Having served throughout the duration of the war, enlisting as a private in the 4th New York Infantry in June 1775 and retiring with a captain's commission in 1781, and given his impoverished condition, he was certain that no one was more entitled to a pension than he. There must be some mistake, he thought; or worse, his enemies were once again conspiring against him:

I have ever been entirely devoted to the rights and dearest interests of my country and the administration of its government, but never with a more hearty ardor than from the memorable year 1800, and have been persecuted for the same to extreme poverty; for a long time have been under perpetual executions and am now, but I am not wretched, for I enjoy a consciousness that I have been an instrument of doing good, and that I continue to do some good. . . . Must I believe what some have suggested, that some bitter opponents to the pension acts, to the administration & to myself, have secretly made, perhaps in the form of affidavits, and sent to the War Dept. insidious libels which they did not know the truth or falacy [sic] of, likely a composition of

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both, in such case information on the subject would have been gratefully received. Poor, debilitated, bowed down by age, with one foot in the grave as I am, the hostile faction have exalted over me, as the Hebrews triumphed over Goliath slain.¹

While the absent pension was probably the result of a simple clerical error, Moulton suspected that once again he, and possibly his country, was under attack by conspiratorial forces. Consistently throughout his life, Moulton defended his vision of rationally constituted authority against threats, both real and imagined. As an officer in the Continental Army, Moulton fought against British tyranny; as a seal hunter in the South Atlantic, he challenged the arbitrary rule of his captain; finally, as a pioneer on the New York frontier he struggled alongside tenant farmers against the political and economic power of a wealthy landlord. William Moulton's story is not only an adventurous tale, but a case study in how one man's actions, based upon a coherent political ideology rooted in the American Revolution, challenged established authority in a variety of contexts in the Early American Republic.

William Moulton's story is preserved in history principally through two sets of documents, the first of which is a pamphlet he published in 1804 detailing a sealing (hunt for seals) expedition he undertook aboard the schooner *Onico* between the years 1799 and 1804. This pamphlet, entitled *A Concise Extract from the Sea Journal of William Moulton*, is a highly charged political pamphlet which documents a mutiny led by Moulton against the ship's captain, George Howe. Moulton's sea narrative, assembled after his voyage, used notes he had taken down in a journal. While the narrative is structured chronologically, each dated entry is filled with retrospective commentary used to explain his actions to an assumed audience. The pamphlet consists of an introduction, the narrative itself, and appendices containing copies of letters he wrote and received while on the voyage. Finally, Moulton's work includes many of the documents relating to the mutiny, such as the crew's remonstrance that was presented to Captain Howe. This journal is important, for it helps to measure the impact Enlightenment ideology had upon a Revolutionary Era mutiny. In a broader sense, such an analysis breathes new life into the historical debate regarding the nature of maritime resistance in the Age of Revolution. The *Onico* mutiny may in itself have been an

1. William Moulton, Revolutionary War pension records (National Archives, Washington, DC; copy at David Library; Washington Crossing, PA), reel #1783, microfilm.

example of traditional maritime resistance to economic and social exploitation, but in the mind of William Moulton, it was ideologically fueled by American Revolutionary principles.

The second set of documents, over sixty pages in all, contains letters Moulton and his friend Daniel Roe wrote to the Congressional Pensions Committee two decades later. These letters and other evidence uncovered in upstate New York refer to Moulton's life on land, after he had completed his voyage to the South Seas, and reveal the political and economic obstacles Moulton encountered as he struggled to succeed as a pioneer farmer. Rich in detail and social commentary, these documents provide an important account of how one frontier farmer challenged what he believed to be the oppressive and unpatriotic implications of Federalist land policies in Western New York. Acting upon his perceived duty to defend his individual liberty and the collective liberties of his fellow farmers, Moulton became an important local figure in democratic politics on the New York frontier. In the end, a seemingly undaunted William Moulton carried the torch of revolution, on both sea and on land, well into the era of the Early Republic.

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William Moulton was born April 17, 1754, probably in Connecticut.² Except for his service in the Revolutionary War, little evidence exists of Moulton's early activities apart from what he provides us in his pension records. We know from his records that Moulton was a sickly youth. His family doctor, "despairing of restoring him to a state of convalescence, recommended nautic [sic] pursuits in the Northern regions of the hemisphere."³ As a young man who "never served apprenticeship at any occupation in his minority," the sea held economic promise for the young Moulton. In fact, Moulton's description of the hands aboard the schooner *Onico* as "almost all green hands, of decent fami-

2. The Federal census of 1790 locates a William Molton living in Windham, CT; since his pension records indicate that his daughter lived in Windham late in his life it is possible that the "Molton" in the census is our Moulton. His early participation in the whale fishery out of New London also indicates his early ties to Connecticut, as well as the fact that he returned to serve in the Connecticut branch of the Continental Army in 1780 after serving in the New York Infantry. There was also a William Moulton born in Windham in 1698 who may be an ancestor of our William Moulton.

3. Moulton, pension records, National Archives, microfilm at David Library of the American Revolution, Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania.

lies, well bred, and educated” reinforces the theory that many late eighteenth and early nineteenth century sailors were landsmen who went to sea out of economic necessity.⁴ Driven by the dwindling supply of land at home, youths from the older regions of New England turned to the sea in the hope of acquiring the capital necessary to purchase a farm of their own.⁵

Unfortunately for our veteran, Moulton's reasons for returning to sea at the age of forty-six may have been similar to those of his younger counterparts. He explains his motivations for going to sea in 1799 as a practical decision to “acquire property and repair my health.”⁶ Moulton had acquired land on the New York frontier years earlier for his service in the Revolutionary War and he possibly hoped that by hunting seals he could acquire the capital necessary to move to Western New York, clear his land, and establish a frontier farm. Since his life had been disrupted by years of service in the Continental Army, Moulton had little to fall back on except the skills he had acquired as a young man at sea. Given these circumstances, his apparent decision to return to the sea to achieve his ultimate goal of farming seems logical.

Before he returned to sea Moulton resided in Pittstown, New York, not far from where he served during the Revolution.⁷ We know very little of Moulton's activities in Pittstown other than that he was a Mason and first Grand Master of the Patriot Lodge No. 39. We know of his Masonic membership because of a published address he gave to the lodge in 1796 where he resigned his position under pressure from the

4. Ibid., William Moulton, *A Concise Extract from the Sea Journal of William Moulton* (Utica: By the Author, 1804), 13.

5. Daniel Vickers, “Nantucket Whalemen in the Deep-Sea Fishery: The Changing Anatomy of an Early American Labor Force,” *The Journal of American History* 72 (September 1985): 295.

6. Moulton, vi.

7. Moulton recalls in his pension letters that he enlisted as a private in Captain Rufus Herrick's Company in Colonel James Holmes' Regiment in the Fourth New York Infantry in June 1775. Afterwards he was made an orderly sergeant and marched to Ticonderoga where he was put in command of the armed schooner *Liberty* and sailed on Lake Champlain. After mooring the schooner at Crown Point he went to Ticonderoga and then to Albany where he received a lieutenant's warrant, enlisted between thirty and forty men and marched back to Ticonderoga to relieve Colonel Holmes. He fought in several battles, including “Bennington Battle” where he was wounded. After serving five years he was sent to Hartford, Connecticut in 1780 where the State Legislature appointed him to a command in the infantry. He retired from service in 1781.

Congregational Church.⁸ Masonry has been described as a major means by which Americans participated directly in the Enlightenment.⁹ Its openness to persons of every social rank, occupation, and religion ran counter to the hierarchical social structure of the Old World and served as a model of and driving force behind the emerging democratic American society.¹⁰ Moulton's membership and active participation in the Masonic movement therefore illustrates his devotion to the Enlightenment and the republican ideals the Masonic order represented in the Early Republic.

The social context of Moulton's resignation, however, illustrates the tension that existed between Freemasonry and organized religion in the period following the Revolution. For many religious New Englanders the rise of Freemasonry threatened to undermine the foundations of the existing social order by creating an alternative source of social morality.¹¹ Possibly as a result of this anxiety, Moulton's church pressured him to resign his Masonic office under threat of excommunication. Moulton explains his decision to resign as a painful one:

I am called upon to withdraw from meeting with you in the Lodge as a necessary means to restore and perpetuate harmony in another society, I mean the Church to which I belong, to which I feel myself under obligation. Altho' I have as independent and unquestionable a right to enjoy all the privileges [sic] of a Mason, as St. Paul had to those of a Roman; yet I with [sic] to submit in condescension [sic] to the weakness and infirmity of dotage led astray by groundless prejudices too deep rooted to be eradicated.¹²

8. William Moulton, *An Oration on the Festival of St. John the Evangelist* (Lansingburgh: By William W. Wands, 1796). Special thanks to Prof. John Brooke of Ohio State University for providing me with this information and information on the Moultons of Troy, New York where one Howard Moulton, a Revolutionary War veteran, ran a coffee house where the Masonic Apollo Lodge was installed in 1796 and the Republican committees met in 1804 and 1807. We have been unable to establish a firm familial connection between the Troy Moultons and William Moulton; however, there may be an ancestral connection through Connecticut and a William Moulton born in Windham in 1698.

9. Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 223.

10. *Ibid.*, 223-224.

11. Dorothy Ann Lipson, *Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut* (Princeton University Press, 1977), 116.

12. Moulton, *An Oration*, p. 6.

Moulton's speech indicates that he was a religious man who felt a greater obligation to his church than to his Masonic duties.¹³ Although he may have seen no conflict between his religious and Masonic duties, he found himself caught up in the social tensions brought about by the Enlightenment and the Revolution. In the end he was forced by society, at least in his public persona, to choose between his religious and Masonic memberships.

Shortly after resigning his position as Grand Master, William Moulton signed aboard the *Onico* as a second mate. The ease with which William Moulton moved between land and sea supports the contention that a fluid demographic boundary between land and sea existed in the Early American Republic.¹⁴ Given this context, the events and commentary Moulton recorded in his sea journal provides us with an interesting example of how the revolutionary ideology permeating post-revolutionary America coincided with traditional forms of maritime resistance to create a mutiny reflective of its place in time. Scholars have long struggled with the problem of determining the exact nature of Jack Tar's rebellious spirit during the Age of Revolution. Did revolutionary ideology flow from the top down to influence the activities of seamen, or did traditional maritime resistance to economic and social exploitation drive the Age of Revolution from the bottom up?¹⁵ While this paper does not pretend to resolve this debate, William Moulton's pam-

13. Moulton's pension and probate records list a diverse collection of religious texts. These texts included J. Huntington, *Calvinism Improved*; J. Sherman, *One God in One Person Only; Methodist Disciplines, Principles and Doctrines*; J. H. Livingston, *Reformed Low Dutch Psalms and Church Service*; J. Priestly, *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*; and one work entitled, *On Unitarianism*. Many Congregational churches, such as most of those in Boston, moved to Unitarianism in the early republic.

14. For a discussion of this historical problem in the context of another eighteenth century seaman see Daniel Vickers, "An Honest Tar: Ashley Brown of Marblehead," *The New England Quarterly* 69, (1996): 531-553. In his article, "Beyond Jack Tar," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 50 (1993): 424, Vickers argues that understanding maritime affairs, "requires a coastal or transoceanic perspective, a sensitivity to the methodological problems of researching people and ideas on the move, and a greater willingness to learn from landward history than many maritime historians have previously displayed."

15. See Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (1968): 371-407; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 243-249; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

phlet provides us with an interesting tool with which to analyze this problem. In fact, William Moulton's grievances, grounded in the traditional struggle of sailors against economic and social exploitation, were voiced in Revolutionary discourse. For him, the struggles he experienced at sea and the revolutionary cause were one and the same. As a result, Moulton viewed the traditional problems faced by seamen not only as a struggle for economic and social justice, but as part of a larger struggle to perpetuate the American Revolution.

While his Masonic membership indicates his devotion to the Enlightenment, William Moulton's writing style shows that he was well-educated in Revolutionary ideology more generally. First of all, his sea journal belongs to a literary genre that served as a driving force behind the American Revolution—Revolutionary pamphlet literature, which it resembles in at least two ways: the journal is didactic in purpose, designed to educate the public in the social conditions necessary to preserve liberty, and it is suspicious in tone, serving to testify against the corruptive abuses of power thought to have been part of a great conspiracy against liberty.¹⁶ In his introduction, Moulton indicates that his narrative serves an instructive purpose. He hopes that the people who read it will more easily recognize tyranny where it exists and understand the value of a government protective of liberty:

I thought my duty to society called loudly on me not to pass the criminal and highly reprehensible conduct of *George Howe* and *George Haley* unnoticed in the subsequent pages. . . . With all its imperfections, it is a consolation to me, that I have contributed my mite [sic] in bearing testimony against infidelity, tyranny, oppression and vice. If it ultimately tends in the least degree to the furtherance of good government and the happiness of my fellow-men to the promotion of those excellencies which are opposed to the vices in the following work decried, it will be an ample reward.¹⁷

Moulton's arguments cannot be dismissed as a simple diatribe against Captain Howe; he uses Howe's abuse of power as an example of how liberty can be undermined and suggests alternatives to his arbitrary leadership. While his grievances may have to a degree been personal (Moulton was relatively old for a sailor at the time, forty-five years of age, and may have had a problem obeying orders from an incompetent and per-

16. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 19.

17. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, pp. iii-v.

haps younger superior officer), his hopes that his journal would serve to contribute to the preservation of liberty in the new nation he helped to create indicates a higher purpose.

Consistent in Moulton's writings is his belief that rational government and the liberty it ensured needed to be constantly protected against conspiratorial forces, regardless of the context.¹⁸ While William Moulton's feelings on this score are perhaps most evident in his pension letters, he also indicates in his sea journal that he saw it as his duty to defend liberty at every opportunity. He writes:

I have not devoted seven of my juvenile years in an arduous struggle for independence, and contended even to the shedding of my youthful blood for the establishment of a rational government, to suffer the gross abuse of it by such a miscreant as George Howe, to pass with impunity.¹⁹

William Moulton was one of perhaps many common Americans in the Early Republic who was determined to protect his newly won liberty. What distinguishes him is that he continued a tradition of publication important for the ideological entrenchment of the American Republic into the early nineteenth century. His journal is not a simple account of a mutiny, nor a list of petty and perhaps personal grievances, but a political document, part of a literary genre which furthered an ongoing American revolutionary cause by instructing, explaining, and testifying against various threats to liberty present in society, in this case a society that had taken to the waves.

That William Moulton chose this medium to express his grievances should not come as a surprise considering the context in which he was educated. Born in 1754, Moulton would have come of age during a time when political debate was a part of daily life in New England. As the issues surrounding the crisis with Great Britain became the subject of numerous pamphlets, almanacs, and newspapers articles, colonists of Moulton's class, who once were thought to be below politics, rapidly became (and viewed themselves as) active and important participants in political matters. Furthermore, in a place like colonial America where technical literacy was relatively high, anyone could turn this education to liberal ends, limited only by the availability of materials and imagi-

18. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

nation.²⁰ More than likely, a young and diligent Moulton took an early interest in these political discussions; and while we have no direct evidence concerning his formal education, his writing conforms to the style and tone of American Revolutionary pamphlets. It is thus safe to surmise that such literature contributed to his intellectual development.²¹ Reinforce this early education with several years in military service to the Revolutionary cause, and a revolutionary such as Moulton emerges who was both aptly able to identify threats to liberty and intellectually equipped to defend it.

The factual events Moulton documented concerning the perversion and defense of civil society at sea suggest that tension existed between Moulton and Captain Howe from the very beginning. In the first part of the narrative, Moulton comments on what he perceived to be Howe's numerous abuses of power. Specific grievances include Howe's hoarding of the ship's stores of alcohol, the destruction of Moulton's chest to make room for seal skins not yet acquired, and the captain's overall incompetence in the area of seal hunting. According to Moulton, these abusive practices culminated in a confrontation where Howe challenged Moulton as to his knowledge of preparing seal skins. In Moulton's version of events, his knowledge proved superior to the captain's and Howe, unable to admit his fault, responded by marooning Moulton on an island without provisions.

Under the impression that he had been discharged from service and determined never to serve under Howe again, Moulton struck off on an overland journey across the island in the hopes of securing passage aboard the ship *Mars*.²² Upon reaching the *Mars*, Moulton learned that Captain Howe had been searching for him. Moreover, Howe had insisted that Moulton return to the *Onico*. Moulton refused at first, but under the threat of armed force he returned; for the duration of the journey Moulton considered himself a prisoner aboard the ship.

Howe's abuses allegedly continued. Eventually, the crew drafted a remonstrance that outlined their grievances and an elected committee

20. Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience (1607-1783)* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 549.

21. He owned a copy of a Rousseau work described in his records as "On Politics."

22. The *Mars'* captain was Uriah Swain and was owned by the same Norwich-based company as was the *Onico*. See Edouard Stackpole, *The Sea Hunters, The New England Whalemens During Two Centuries, 1635-1835* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1953), 221-227 and Robert Owen Decker, *The New London Merchants: The Rise and Decline of a Connecticut Port* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), 136.

presented the captain with the document. The crew also outlined a detailed course of action that involved seizing the ship if the captain failed to comply with their demands. They warned their captain that "the measures you shall adopt, will be the pivot upon which our determination to pursue passive, or defensive measures will turn."²³ Howe eventually agreed to reform his leadership and the voyage continued. For the remainder of the season William Moulton drafted letters to various sea captains in the area requesting that a meeting be called to determine his status aboard the *Onico*. A hearing was held on March 15, 1801, and although it was determined that Moulton had been discharged by Howe, the committee recommended that he continue in the service of Captain Uriah Swain. Furthermore, Captain Howe was relieved of his position and replaced by Uriah's brother Valentine Swain, captain of the Norwich-based company's third ship in the area, the *Miantonomah*.

Moulton, upset that he had been made a "tool of to subserve [sic] the ambitious and avaricious views of Captain Swain," refused to serve under Uriah Swain and began hunting seals himself.²⁴ He secured passage between islands and to the mainland on various ships including the *Onico*. During this period Moulton and other sailors formed a seal-hunting society governed by laws voted on by the men. The *Onico* was eventually sold and Moulton spent the rest of his journey seal hunting in the South Seas until he secured a passage home in 1804.²⁵

Aboard the *Onico*, Moulton's Revolutionary ideas colored both the expectations he had of the captain as a leader and influenced the form and direction of the crew's protest. Moulton held high expectations for his captain. He believed the captain not only should obey seafaring custom and ensure the voyage's economic success, but also that he should be a morally upstanding, rational leader. According to Moulton, Captain Howe failed on all fronts.

Some maritime historians have argued that discipline aboard merchant and naval vessels was carefully regulated by ritual and custom:

23. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 52.

24. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 73. On page 77 of his narrative, Moulton describes a reconciliation between himself and Howe in which Moulton tells Howe that he regretted being the cause for his removal from leadership and that he was "willing to suspend our controversy and live in amity with him until I arrived in America, provided no new occasion of umbrage arose."

25. See Amasa Delano, "Voyage in the Ship Perseverance," in *Five Sea Captains*, ed. Walter Teller (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1960), 49-51 for Delano's account of Captain Howe during his voyage and Howe's struggle to get reimbursed by the Spanish authorities for the *Onico*. Howe died of a fever in Valparaiso in 1805.

the captain's authority rested upon the carefully calculated distribution of punishment.²⁶ According to Moulton, Captain Howe was a careless disciplinarian, punishing the crew often and without reason:

He was very adroit in punishing *all* hands for the offense of a part, or of an individual; without informing for what, and where there was no evidence of guilt: He also punished the innocent and let the guilty go free; but all this was of importance, to excite a lively sense of his terrible sovereignty, and to promote his own pleasure, which appeared to be proportionate to the misery of others.²⁷

Howe's inconsistent disciplinary practices violated the norms of maritime custom and caused Moulton to call into question the legitimacy of his actions. Furthermore, Moulton's account also suggests that Captain Howe further undermined his own authority by actively encouraging political divisions among his own crew:

He was an ingenious adept at sowing the seeds of dissension, exciting broils, and keeping up divisions among his crew. Discord among his crew was the basis of his strength; and nothing was so formidable to him as to see them united.²⁸

While Howe may have believed that his actions secured his power over the men, he failed to recognize that the political divisions he created could eventually be directed against his own authority.

Captain Howe's inconsistent disciplinary practices were only part of the problem. For Moulton the captain's authority also rested on the way he measured up to his own moral and political prejudices. As Moulton's account suggests, the sailors themselves came armed with their own expectations based upon their experiences on land. William Moulton was one such man who had a sophisticated sense of the qualities a leader should possess: a captain should not only be morally upstanding and virtuous but intelligent and reasonable in his administration of ship-board affairs.

While eighteenth century seamen may have sought a captain who was morally upstanding, fair, and decent, we learn early on in Moulton's narrative that he believed Howe possessed none of these qualities.²⁹ In

26. Rediker, *Between the Devil*, p. 218, 244; Greg Denning, *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 144-145.

27. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 12.

28. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 12.

29. Rediker, *Between the Devil*, p. 242.

fact, Moulton is determined to show that an inexperienced yet deferential crew was effectively left at the mercy of a morally corrupt captain. Moulton says of his fellow sailors:

His crew were almost all green hands, of decent families, well bred, and educated; accustomed to pay due deference to superiors, and revere government; young and ambitious, ready to brave all hardships, and put up with every thing, for the prospects (as they imagined) before them of making a voyage.—Their minds were deeply impressed with a sense of absolute controul their officers held over them,—of the criminality of the least remissness on their part, and of their liability to forfeit their shares in the voyage for the least disobedience of orders, and their lives for rising opposition.³⁰

In contrast, the crew complained in their remonstrance that Howe had monopolized the ship's stores of alcohol and kept himself in "a state of deep intoxication a very great part of the time until they were exhausted."³¹ Furthermore, they informed Howe that, "you would be much more fit to govern others by first learning to govern yourself."³² Moulton also attacked Howe's character by stating that, "he had neither the breeding or heart to treat me with the respect due to a second mate."³³ While his criticism may have been based on the common sailor's desire to follow a morally upstanding leader or his personal belief that he was of a better breed than Howe, Moulton's religious beliefs and Masonic values also may have informed this attack on Howe's character. Regardless, this critique of Howe had important implications for the dynamics of power aboard the *Onico*. As long as Moulton questioned Captain Howe's character, he would have trouble accepting his authority. As a former Revolutionary officer who was probably twice the age of most men on the vessel, Moulton's vision of authority would undoubtedly have commanded respect.

Moulton also brought aboard ship the expectation that a ship's captain should be intelligent and act rationally. Moulton's critique of Howe's on these counts is a sophisticated argument aimed at proving that the captain was an unfit leader. He writes:

Sundry instances have occurred which evinced the master was determined not to be influenced by the force of reason, but by his own

30. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 13.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

capricious fancy. He formed opinions from the impulse of the moment. Abruptly gave the lie to the most eminently approved scientific authorities on geography or any subject which happened to be the topic of conversation; very readily metamorphosed any, and almost every thing, into monsters, many of which had the least likeness to the original, and with the most positive assurance presended [sic] his own production, a production of a pur-blind imagination, as a true characature of the original.³⁴

While Howe's intellectual abilities may have fallen short of Moulton's lofty expectations, the captain's inability to think problems through rationally also had practical implications that undermined his authority. In some cases Howe allegedly contradicted his own orders. For example, shortly after Moulton was marooned without provisions he was shocked by a message that Howe had ordered him to return to work. In Moulton's words, "The inconsistency of this silly message, assuming control over me after he had discharged me, and exerted himself to deprive me of subsistence, is descriptive of the man."³⁵

Furthermore, Howe's incompetence also put the voyage in jeopardy. Moulton was particularly upset that the captain had ordered another deck raised on the *Onico* during the height of seal hunting season. In Moulton's view the crew's provisions were needlessly consumed and a valuable opportunity to acquire skins was wasted.³⁶ Here Moulton's grievances may have been more firmly grounded in the economic interests of the crew. For Moulton, who wasn't getting any younger, this voyage was a race against time, perhaps a last-ditch attempt to collect the capital necessary build a better life for himself in his old age. Howe's incompetent management of the economic enterprise would have distressed Moulton and provided the entire crew with a tangible reason to challenge his authority.

Moulton's understanding of the economic issues involved in the voyage was keen. In an increasingly commercial industry captains often took advantage of their crew in order to make the voyage more profitable; William Moulton viewed these captains with disdain:

The oppression of these tyrants was insufferable the moment their voyages were obtained, and the shares of their men more coveted than their services. American citizens and seamen are dispersed through-

34. Ibid., p. 10.

35. Ibid., p. 32.

36. Ibid., p. 51.

out this part of the globe. . . . It is seldom indeed, that disturbances arise to any considerable height, among a crew where the master and first mate are exemplary [sic] and men of rectitude. Were there none but such in the service of our merchants, American seamen would not be dispersed on board foreign national ships by the connivance of their masters, nor sent off without their wages in every foreign port where sailors can be obtained for wages a little less per month than is given out in America. Were it not for the severe injunctions the emperor of China has laid our ship masters under, to take all foreigners out of his dominions that they bring in, I have no doubt that it would be a common thing, certainly not very *uncommon*, to see our ships return from China, manned with Lasears and other oriental slaves, who come nearest to the requisite qualifications, viz. working for, and living upon nothing.³⁷

According to Moulton, these captains not only would abandon crew members in ports where they could obtain cheaper labor, but sometimes would mislead sailors into believing that they were joining a seal hunting voyage only to find out later that they were going to be part of an illegal and dangerous expedition to smuggle materials up and down the Spanish-controlled coast of South America. As Moulton describes, "by these means the men are not only employed without pay, in a service they never shipped for, but are liable to capture, to be imprisoned, and the object of their voyage defeated. The rigor of the law condemns them to slavery in the mines."³⁸ He adds that only when voyages based on shares are conducted by "proper men" will these evils be remedied.³⁹ Here, Moulton argues, moral and rational leadership was needed to combat the traditional enemies of merchant sailors: social and economic exploitation.

Was Moulton's protest genuinely based on his contempt for Howe's lack of morals and intelligence, or would he and the crew have followed the captain to hell for a profit? The subjective nature of the evidence makes it hard to say, but the sincerity of his narrative indicates that Moulton believed that if the captain had acted morally and rationally, the economic failure of the mission would not have been pinned on Captain Howe. Since Captain Howe failed to live up to Moulton's expectations, he would bear ultimate responsibility and provide the rest of the crew with a reason to revolt. In Moulton's mind, corruption flowed from the arbitrary power exercised by Howe, adversely affecting the voyage and its economic success. It is difficult to surmise how

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Moulton would have reacted had Howe acted in the same manner and the voyage had been an economic success. Even if Moulton had held fast to his principles it may have been unlikely that he could have convinced his young and perhaps impressionable shipmates that mutiny was in their best interest. But Moulton faced no such dilemma. For him the failure of the voyage and the corrupt leadership of the captain went hand-in-hand and the political explanations he provides in his sea journal are his proof.

The Revolutionary ideology of the day not only informed Moulton's criticism of the captain, it also shaped the form and direction of the resultant mutiny. Moulton believed that the American republic he had fought to establish and the laws on which it was based were designed to protect the liberty of its citizens. This allowed him to question the captain's authority by appealing to what he saw as a higher authority. This appeal to law as a safeguard to liberty, a hallmark of American Revolutionary ideology, had a corrosive effect upon Captain Howe's authority while serving to justify, in William Moulton's mind, the crew's mutinous actions.

The contradiction between the authority of the captain and the rule of law is an interesting maritime dilemma. Greg Denning intelligently summarizes this problem by drawing an analogy to Roman forms of discipline and law.⁴⁰ He draws a distinction between *iudicatio* (law) and *coercitio* (force). *Coercitio* was a power used by Roman magistrates and the imperial army to compel obedience without an appeal to some fundamental power. This was the governing principle in the Roman provinces or, in other words, for the world outside the walls of Rome. As Denning explains:

The distinction between discipline (*coercitio*, the power to compel obedience absolutely), and law (*iudicatio*, the determination of rights), is one that has teased human ingenuity to describe — to textualize in legislation and constitution — and to act out — to reify in symbol and ritual. Institutions of discipline — armies, navies, religious orders, prisons — sit uncomfortably alongside institutions of law — parliaments, citizenship — because in a modern state, as in the emerging modern states of the eighteenth century, there is no “outside the walls of Rome.” Citizenship and its politics touch everyone. Institutions that see themselves as “outside the walls,” that rely on

39. Ibid., p. 105.

40. Denning, *Mr. Bligh*, pp. 131-132.

coercitio, hold a contradiction. They cannot escape politics, when compulsion is continually negotiated in manufactured sets of rules.⁴¹

According to Dening, the contradiction between *iudicatio* and *coercitio* can become dangerous when political consciousness is raised by events such as a revolution or the spread of Enlightenment ideology.⁴² For revolutionaries such as Moulton, such contradictions would have been glaring.

For Americans of Moulton's time, and indeed for Moulton himself, liberty meant the capacity to exercise their natural rights within limits set not by powerful and arbitrary authority figures but by laws enacted by legislatures containing within them the proper balance of forces.⁴³ For Moulton there was no "outside the walls of Rome"; he expected Howe to respect the laws of the American Republic that in his mind protected his liberty:

He was so tenacious of his orders, (and so was his first mate) that there could be nothing right, though necessarily and perfectly well done without them; nor wrong, which were done in obedience to them. consequently some of their orders I could heartily second, others passively obey, and by some connivance evade most of such as clashed with the laws of my country; but to hesitate a moment to obey was a crime sufficient to damn a nation.⁴⁴

Moulton believed that Howe had assumed absolute arbitrary authority over the crew in defiance of what he believed to be a superior authority: American law. This concern was also voiced in the crew's remonstrance to the captain:

What power is there that you could have assumed which you have not assumed? may we not with propriety say, you have by right or assumption taken it upon you to exercise *all* power. . . . If you exercise this mighty power by right, where let us ask, did you derive this right? was it derived from the people of the State of Connecticut thro' the organ of his excellency [Governor] Jno. Trumbull? He, we believe, executed your warrant. Had that illustrious citizen authority to delegate such power? did he ever exercise it himself? would he ever had executed this warrant to you if he had entertained the remotest idea of the rule you would have made of it?⁴⁵

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., p. 153.

43. Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p. 77.

44. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 13.

45. Ibid., pp. 50-51.

Furthermore, they wrote of Howe:

You have declared yourself 'the Fountain Head and Governor of this Island,' and exercised your authority without law or reason, declaring that we must implicitly submit without a murmur, to your sovereign will and pleasure. You are so filled with a sense of the consummate respect that is due to you, that it swallows up every idea of the least respect that is due to any of us.⁴⁶

Based on the writing style, it is quite likely that William Moulton played a key, if not the principal role in drafting these grievances — grievances that illustrate his knowledge of law and its role in securing liberty. Moulton's devotion to the Revolution and the rule of law undermined his ability to defer to the captain's arbitrary authority and provided him with a justification to revolt, leading to a politically justified mutiny appropriate to this Age of Revolution even as it may have reflected maritime traditions of proper authority.

Mutiny has been defined as embracing both active and passive insubordination, undertaken with or without arms, with or without violence.⁴⁷ The action taken by the *Onico* crew in presenting Howe with the remonstrance and threatening to remain on the island until their term was up is an example of mutiny in the broad sense of the term.⁴⁸ More importantly, the actions of the crew reflect both a collective resistance to economic exploitation and their deference to the political institutions they left behind in their native New England; both the form of the mutiny and the crew's expressed intentions demonstrate the influence of the American Revolution on the collective nature of maritime resistance.

As Marcus Rediker has argued, the collective spirit of the common seaman was formed in order to limit the potential exploitation and oppressive discipline inherent in seafaring life.⁴⁹ Many times this collectivism manifested itself in customary forms of resistance that included mutiny. For instance, the crew of the *Onico* drew upon familiar New England institutions and models when they drafted their mutinous remonstrance. They elected a representative committee "consisting of a moderator and four members, for the purpose of presenting our

46. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

47. Elihu Rose, "The Anatomy of Mutiny," *Armed Forces and Society* 8 (Summer 1982): 561.

48. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 52.

49. Rediker, *Between the Devil*, p. 243.

remonstrance to the master, to manage all our business with him, and whom we will resort for counsel, and whose counsel, advice and decisions shall be binding on us.”⁵⁰ If the crew was mostly green, and Moulton was the driving force behind the mutiny, then we might expect that they would draw upon the land-based models of government with which they were familiar. In doing so, the crew of the *Onico* assembled a representative government that would rule the ship in the event of the Captain’s impeachment. In this case, the *Onico* mutiny was as much an expression of the crew’s faith in representative institutions as it was an example of traditional maritime collectivism.

The stated intentions of the mutinous crew also reflect a heightened political consciousness that centered on the rule of law. For example, if it proved necessary for the crew to take the captain prisoner and return to Connecticut, they agreed that:

our protest shall be prepared and lodged at the custom-house; that we will not yield to the influence of owners, or that derived from any other source than the best counsel of our own choosing; and that the laws of our country, to which we appeal, we will adhere to, honor and respect.⁵¹

The crew would appeal only to the laws of their nation to determine legality of their mutiny. In fact, seamen had good access to New England courts in the colonial and post Revolutionary period, although the fear of appearing insubordinate kept many sailors from registering their complaints.⁵² William Moulton and his comrades aboard the *Onico* were aware of their rights and in the context of the times they were unlikely to take Howe’s perceived abuse lying down. Their sense of Howe’s illegal and counter-Revolutionary practices led them to seek legal recourse. The crew could have decided to maroon the captain and take possession of the ship; instead, they would seek justice in the courts. They possessed the faith that the laws of their nation would supply them with such justice. In the end, such action was unnecessary as the captain accepted their demands and reformed his leadership.

While Moulton devotes a significant portion of his journal to describe the evils inherent in Captain Howe’s leadership, he also pro-

50. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 53.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

52. Morris, Robert B., *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1965), 268; L. Kinvin Wroth, “The Massachusetts Vice-Admiralty Courts,” in George A. Billias, ed., *Law and Authority in Colonial America* (Barre: Barre Publishers, 1965), 40-42.

vides the reader with an interesting example of his version of a rational government and describes the conditions he believed were necessary for such a government to exist. Upon being relieved of his duties aboard the *Onico*, Moulton joined a society of independent seal hunters in the South Atlantic. His account of their government combines an understanding of the egalitarian spirit of maritime tradition and adherence to democratic political principles.

The seal hunters' society consisted of Moulton and other independent men who "met and chose a moderator and a clerk and formed rules for their government."⁵³ The rules stated that the decision of a majority would be binding for all. Furthermore, they provided guidelines as to how and when seals would be taken, what penalties would be enforced if the rules were broken, and provisions for people who became sick or disabled. This final provision reflects the egalitarian nature of the enterprise. Marcus Rediker has argued that the sailors' traditional egalitarianism grew out of their constant struggle against poverty and emphasized hospitality and cooperation, reciprocity and mutuality, and generosity over accumulation.⁵⁴ For sailors who had been abandoned by profit-seeking masters such cooperation may have been necessary for survival. The seal hunters' government certainly reflected these values, but more importantly for Moulton it represented the ability of common sailors to establish a rational government that protected the liberty of its citizens.

At one point in his narrative Moulton writes of Howe, "What idea must such a man entertain of personal liberty, or the rights of individuals?"⁵⁵ In Moulton's opinion, the seal hunters of the South Seas had a stronger grasp of these issues than Captain Howe. He argues that these men, "have exhibited one instance of a ship's company who knew how to use their liberty, after having the power in their own hands."⁵⁶ Furthermore, "without masters, they all act as intelligent, they conduct with as much order, steadiness and perseverance as if they had been commanded by the best of men."⁵⁷ In Moulton's opinion the seal hunters succeeded because they acted virtuously and rationally. Furthermore,

53. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 99. Moulton's use of terms such as "clerk" and "moderator" (standard offices in New England town meetings) further illustrate his familiarity with the political structure of his native New England.

54. Rediker, *Between the Devil*, pp. 247-248.

55. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 74.

56. *Ibid.*, p. vi.

57. *Ibid.*

their laws represented an effort to protect the natural right of individuals to secure property free from the arbitrary interference of powerful men.

Moulton's political philosophy is best illustrated in a quotation he cites from the journal of Captain Cook. This passage serves as an appropriate allegory for his idea of good government:

I shall add one remark made by Capt. Cook on the animals that inhabit this island because it contains a pretty lesson, worthy the imitation of rational beings, and is a striking admonition to men of inflammatory, rancorous spirits. 'It is amazing to see, he observes, how different animals which inhabit this little spot are mutually reconciled. They seem to have entered into a league not to disturb each others tranquility [sic]. The sea lions occupy most of the sea coast; the sea bears take up their abode in the island; the shags have post in the higher cliffs; the penguins fix their quarters where there is most easy communication to and from the sea; and the other birds choose more retired situations. We have seen all these animals mix together like domestic cattle and poultry in a farm-yard without one attempting to molest the other: Nay I have observed the eagles and the vultures sitting on the hills among the shags, without either the old or the young of the latter being disturbed at their presence.'⁵⁸

For Moulton the animals' behavior represents the possibility that rational men can enter into a "league" and live peacefully, allowing each other, no matter how vast the power differences between them, to pursue their respective interests without conflict. There exists no powerful leader to guide their actions, their "mutual reconciliation" ensures peace and harmony. This mutual reconciliation was present in the rules governing the seal hunters' island community. For Moulton it was also embodied in the laws of the American Republic that he had fought to establish.

But what conditions were necessary for such a government to exist? Was rational government achievable by any group of people, or only by Americans and unfettered seamen? While on his voyage Moulton had the opportunity to witness a burgeoning revolutionary movement in South America. Moulton approved of it, yet believed it stood little chance of success:

The fire of liberty was enkindling thro' all the Spanish South-America; the people are forming select numbers of two, three or four in a club in every considerable town; they are confederated under certain

injunctions, and communicate with one another. . . . Should the kingdom of Spain be invaded by a neighboring power, or should the security of the crown be threatened by the people, a revolution here would be the probable consequence. I question however whether such an event would in the least ameliorate the condition of the great body of the people. The express orders the commandants receive from their superiors, which they are often prompted by mercenary views to enforce, and their own wills are the supreme law; they know no other, and how should they? knowledge is acquired by diligence even by those who have the means—They are prohibited the means and are immersed in indolence and licentiousness. That an equal representative body of the people chosen by themselves should make precise rules by which their rulers are to govern themselves in the exercise of their function is what few, perhaps not one in ten thousand of them ever conceived. Their governors and commandants know not what civil liberty is.⁵⁹

Moulton realized that he had come from a society in which many people of all classes had a sophisticated sense of their political liberties and expected their leaders to be responsive to their needs. However, in his view the officials of Spanish South America practiced arbitrary rule upon an oppressed and uneducated public. Tyranny was absolute as the South American people were deprived of the means by which they could learn about ideas such as civil liberty, let alone act upon them. In Moulton's mind, for a revolution to succeed in Chile it would need more people like himself: educated, politically savvy individuals, well versed in Enlightenment ideas and prepared to fight for their full establishment.⁶⁰

In sum, the *Onico* mutiny was not simply a reflection of traditional maritime resistance to social and economic exploitation, but an act of revolt reflective of its era in history and heavily influenced by Revolutionary principles. A young and impressionable crew, possibly driven to the sea due to a lack of opportunity on land, was placed in the charge of a captain who was at worst incompetent, or was at best imprudent in

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

60. Moulton's narrative also suggests some admiration for the ancient cultures of the American Indians as well as some sympathy for their fate at the hands of the Spanish. He describes the Native Americans as, "the most civil, honest, and industrious" of the inhabitants and marveled at their ancient feats of engineering. In this sense Moulton may have wished, like Rousseau in his *Discourse on Inequality* (1755), to use Native American culture and traditions to contrast what he saw as the more hierarchical and oppressive Spanish system of government. This is especially interesting given the fact that Moulton had a copy of Rousseau in his personal library latter in life. See Moulton, *Sea Journal*, pp. 120-123 for his comments on Native Americans.

his use of power. In the middle was an old sailor and Revolutionary War veteran, full of self-importance and well-educated in politics. Add to the mixture economic misfortune and you have the makings of a mutinous situation.

Moreover, Moulton's journal provides us with perhaps the best evidence yet that, at least in some cases, Jack Tar's participation in the revolutionary political movements of the day was well-informed by strong ideological principles. Educated in the democratic politics at an early age, William Moulton had been willing to fight for his beliefs in the American Revolution and on board the *Onico*. In his mind he had fought for the establishment and maintenance of a rational government headed by virtuous leaders, secured by law, and revolving around the preservation of individual liberties. While his grievances against the social and economic exploitation of the merchant ship were part of a long-standing tradition in maritime history, the words and methods he used to combat these perceived evils were part of the Age of Revolution. He viewed these battles as part of a continuing struggle against the infringement of arbitrary rule upon liberty and carried these political attitudes with him to the New York frontier.

* * *

In 1811 William Moulton settled on land in Western New York that he had drawn for his service in the Revolutionary War. Having survived a perilous journey to the South Seas in which he had successfully challenged the authority of Captain Howe, he was now about to confront another political challenge, on the New York frontier. When Moulton moved onto his bounty lands in the present-day town of Butler he confronted a system of land distribution in direct conflict with his democratic political ideology. For both nationalistic and political reasons he challenged the established authority in the region, leaving him an economically ruined man. Based on the historical evidence, we find that William Moulton was late in life a leading local politician who fought against Federalist land policies in Upstate New York, and lost.

As ill fortune would have it, the land on which Moulton settled was located near a 1.2 million acre estate which had been purchased by an association of British land speculators headed by Sir William Pulteney. In 1791 the association bought the land in Western New York from prominent Federalist Robert Morris, a move that coincided with the interests of American Federalists who sought to encourage both Anglo-

American rapprochement in general and British investment in the young republic in particular.⁶¹ As historian Helen Cowan describes it:

The loose type of association which Pultney and his collaborators used made a convenient business structure. It would permit the members to turn over the land at once for a cash profit, to sell it bit by bit to small settlers on the plan then becoming popular in America, or to administer it as an absentee landlord's estate -- as was actually to become its fate.⁶²

Since land could not be held by aliens and non-residents under American law, the association hired Charles Williamson, a former British military officer and now naturalized American citizen to become the association's land agent. Williamson and his associates, along with his successor Robert Troup would be the key players dictating the settlement patterns in Western New York. The fever for land speculation often created feudal-like estates in Western New York.⁶³ Land speculators and their agents would often purchase large tracts of land, build mansions, and model their lifestyles along the lines of the British aristocracy. Williamson and Troup were no exception to this rule.

This was the situation that William Moulton confronted upon his arrival in Wolcott in 1811. He was not pleased, to say the least. In a letter dated July 27, 1820 he wrote to the pension office recalling his experiences in the region:

This town is three fourths parts of it a tract sold by the State, to a Scottish Noble, Lord Pultney [sic], to which was annexed a strip of military land granted by the Legislature of this State as a bounty to their revolutionary officers and soldiers.

In the year 1810 the said town was organized under the inauspicious rule of the under agent who was empowered to give articles of the Pultney land in small parcels to actual settlers, and thus established a little British [sic] territory in the State, organized with a high toned set of civil & military officers, or blue light petty nobles, who poured contempt on the democratic heads of this and the national administration.

Early in the year 1811 I removed on to the lot I drew, which fell in this town — and planted my countrys [sic] standard and repaired

61. Helen I. Cowan, *Charles Williamson: Genesee Promoter* (Rochester, NY: The Rochester Historical Society, 1941), 15-33.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

63. Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York, 1800-1840* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 127-135.

to it, and have been indefatigable in revolutionizing the town, and supporting the measures of government; which has brought down on my devoted head all the rancour and implausable [sic] malignity, which grow out of disappointed ambition, removal from office, eclipsing of power and influence: My exertions for the reelection of the Vice President for our Executive in opposition to Clinton and his faction will probably cause my removal from the office of commissioner.⁶⁴

Obviously, Moulton vehemently opposed the agents of the Pulteney Estate. But what was it about these agents and their practices that angered him so? Part of the reason has to do with the Estate's British ties and his nationalistic support of the War of 1812. Furthermore, Moulton was angered by land speculation in general and the tenant system that resulted from Pulteney land policies. These political beliefs placed him at the forefront of a developing democratic political ideology in New York. In the end, his efforts to revolutionize the New York frontier would cost him dearly.

For a Revolutionary War veteran such as Moulton, the idea of a British noble holding American land could be expected to ignite patriotic passions. As Williamson wrote of his tenure as land agent for the Pulteney Estate, such anti-British hostility was to be expected on the frontier, especially given the British alliance with the Native Americans:

Even previous to 1794, there was a strong predisposition against every thing that was British. But this was more particularly the case in those parts of the back country adjacent to the British settlements; and where, from the influence of the British government with the Indians, there was too much reason to fear that hostilities from that quarter would be directed against these infant settlements. These jealousies met me in an hundred mortifying instances; and they were with difficulty prevented from having the most disagreeable effects, both to me and every old countryman in the settlements. To such an extent was this carried, that every road I talked of was said to be for the purpose of admitting the Indians and British; every set of arms I procured — though really to enable the settlers to defend themselves against the Indians — was said to be for supplying the expected enemy; and the very grass seed I brought into the country for the purpose of supplying the farmers, was seized as gun powder going to the enemies of the country.⁶⁵

64. Moulton, Pension Records, National Archives, microfilm at David Library, Washington Crossing.

65. Orasmus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps & Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester: William Alling, 1852), 274-275.

A similar form of anti-British sentiment appears in Moulton's letter; however, what are we to make of his comments alluding to the agency's control over local politics? What of these civil and military officers who "poured contempt on the democratic heads of this and the national administration"?

Most likely, Moulton was concerned over the Pulteney agents' influence over local politics. These agents established their influence by selling land to settlers on terms that made them dependent tenants of the Pulteney Estate. In his study of the Genesee region of New York, located to the west of Moulton's land, Neil McNall describes the difficulty early settlers in the region had in gaining access to the soil:

The land in the Genesee, briefly the princely patrimony of Massachusetts, was alienated to speculators, whose prime concern was to gain a maximum of profit from its sale. Thus the farmer seeking land found he had to deal with the speculators or their resident agents on the proprietor's terms. Rare indeed was the settler with sufficient cash to buy his tract outright, and almost invariably years would elapse before the land contract was replaced by a deed in fee. Even then, in many instances, further years passed before the mortgage which covered the unpaid remnant of the purchase price would be paid off, the indenture discharged, and title acquired by the farmer.⁶⁶

New settlers often could not pay for the land or the improvements necessary to begin farming. They first had to make arrangements with the land agents who, anxious to get settlers upon their lands, could provide the settlers with the tools they needed to clear land and make it productive. The agent would provide the settler with the land and goods up front with the hope that the farmer could pay him cash in the future. In Wolcott this often meant that settlers did not make a first payment on their lands until the interest on their holdings reached one half of the purchase price.⁶⁷ The settler was forced into dependency on the agent and the agent therefore wielded significant power in local politics.⁶⁸

66. Neil Adams McNall, *An Agricultural History of the Genesee Valley, 1790-1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), 240-241.

67. John Ogden Wadsworth, *Wolcott, New York, Old and New* (Wolcott, NY: Wadsworth, 1975), 73.

68. Even freeholders such as Moulton who were granted land had difficulty establishing a successful farm on the frontier. Owning land meant little economically unless that land was under cultivation or could be sold for cash to pay for improvements. The records concerning Moulton's estate indicate that he might have found that the best way to profit from his land was to sell it off to new settlers. By 1818, Moulton had sold all

In Wolcott, agents of the Pulteney Estate would have monopolized political power in the township to the dismay of those freeholders such as Moulton who opposed their privileged position. On a regional level, for example, prominent Pulteney agents from outside Wolcott attempted to influence local politics. In 1818, petitions were circulated in Wolcott for the creation of a new county. The new county would have included the northern area of Seneca County where Wolcott was located. The people of Wolcott, weary of the repeated journeys to the distant county seats of Auburn and Waterloo, generally supported the measure. The Pulteney agency, however, did not agree that valuable cash should be spent on the construction of new public buildings and launched a campaign against the petition. One agent made repeated trips to Wolcott on town meeting days to speak out against the measure until it was defeated.⁶⁹

Wolcott's local power structure also illustrates the political influence of the Pulteney agency. The first town supervisor of Wolcott, Osgood Church, was also the local agent for the sale of Pulteney lands and would therefore have been the principal local target of Moulton's ire.⁷⁰ According to Moulton, he would have been one of the "blue light petty nobles" who were organizing a "little British [sic] territory" in the region. From the regional level down to the local township this pattern represents what Alan Taylor has described as political "interest building" among a nascent local aristocracy. Drawing upon pre-Revolutionary precedents, men of great wealth and power would extend favors to local interests in return for their political support. The result was a deferential and hierarchical political culture in which the influence of great men would extend down through intermediaries, with their own local interests, to the common voters.⁷¹ With the Pulteney agents at the top and town notables such as Osgood Church on the local level, it is likely that such a pattern existed in Wolcott. For William Moulton, a devoted supporter

of the 500 acres of land that he settled on in 1811 with only 77 acres going to his son. Interestingly enough, his sale of land to his son coincides with his pension application of 1818, possibly in an effort to exaggerate his impoverished condition and insure his eligibility. Also interesting is his sale of 300 acres of land in July, 1816, the very year that Moulton states he fell victim to the devices of his political opponents. See Appendix for a record of Moulton's land transactions.

69. Wadsworth, *Wolcott*, p. 73.

70. Lewis H. Clark, *Military History of Wayne County, N. Y.* (Sodus, NY: Lewis H. Clark, Hulett & Gaylord, 1883), 35; Wadsworth, *Wolcott*, p. 71.

71. Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 233.

of republican political principles, such a system represented a continuation of the political culture that he had fought to overthrow in the Revolution. Political power was to extend upward from the people, not downward through a web of political patronage. Real anger lay behind his critique of the region's socio-political structure.⁷² Unfortunately, his efforts to "revolutionize" the town against this aristocratic political structure would leave him open to the vengeful actions of powerful men.

Upon his arrival in Wolcott in 1811, Moulton became a leading local political figure. He served as a judge for the Seneca County Court of Common Pleas in 1811 and 1812 and became a county commissioner in 1818, a post he held until at least 1820.⁷³ There exist two first-hand historical accounts of William Moulton that testify to his participation in local politics. One describes him as "a man of courtly manners, of some ability and education and a great Democratic politician," while another gives us a more colorful account:

Major William Moulton, an officer of the Revolution, was a gentleman of the old school. He wore a powdered queue, cocked hat, top-boots and carried a white headed cane. His appearance commanded observation and respect. He never passed a neighbor without a formal salutation nor entered his house without removing his hat. . . . Moulton was a land surveyor and gave much of his time to the cultivation and dissemination of improved varieties of apples and other fruits. He was an active and influential politician, and others of like party principles having located near him, the name "Democrat Hill" was applied to the place.⁷⁴

This account is important for two reasons. First, it shows that contemporaries saw him as a leading figure in local democratic politics and second, that despite his democratic leanings Moulton still possessed a degree of gentility in his mannerisms which distinguished him from the post-revolutionary generation. As historian Alan Taylor has described, wealthy and powerful men of Moulton's generation actively sought to maintain a boundary between themselves and the common people by claiming superior morals, taste, and talents and committing themselves to the ideals of harmony, grace, delicacy, refinement, self-discipline, and

72. Wood, *Radicalism*, p. 181.

73. See Seneca County Common Pleas Register, Vol. 1, Seneca County Records, Waterloo, NY; *Geneva Gazette*, June 24, 1818; and Moulton, Pension Records.

74. Clark, *Wayne County*, p. 87; Wadsworth, *Wolcott*, p. 211.

self-control.⁷⁵ For the old aristocracy the boundary of gentility became increasingly important as divisions between classes became more fluid after the Revolution.

As the above evidence suggests, Moulton may have himself possessed certain genteel qualities. His powdered hair, cocked hat, cane, top-boots, and mannerisms set him apart from his post-revolutionary contemporaries who viewed these attributes as historical relics. Furthermore, Moulton's earlier criticism of Captain Howe's "breeding" and behavior also shows that he expected leaders to act with a certain level of gentility. We should not, however, infer from this evidence that he supported a natural aristocracy. Members of Moulton's generation invented a new enlightened republican form of gentility, with certain moral and social values at their core.⁷⁶ These values, which included politeness, grace, taste, learning and character were acquired through learning, not birth, and the outward display of gentility symbolized his suitability for public leadership.⁷⁷ Only when public leaders abused their power by ignoring the common people and ruling arbitrarily could their gentility be used against them. As Moulton states in the *Sea Journal*, "It is the duty of superiors in government, according to my creed, not only to patiently hear, but to grant the reasonable prayers of the governed if in their power, if not, to soothe them with the most plausible reason."⁷⁸ For Moulton, arbitrary power and not gentility was the core evil that threatened the Revolution.

Moulton's intense nationalism and his belief that arbitrary, aristocratic rule corrupted liberty made him a prime supporter of democratic politics and an opponent of the Federalists. If Northern Democracy is best seen during this period as a popular movement composed of many local challenges to Federalist gentlemen by ambitious Democrats, then William Moulton is a small player in a trend of great historical importance.⁷⁹ According to historian Richard Hofstadter, the American Revolution brought forth a resurgence of republican faith which dismissed the establishment politics of the colonial era and included more middle

75. Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, p. 143.

76. Wood, *Radicalism*, pp. 189-212.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 195-7.

78. Moulton, *Sea Journal*, p. 41.

79. Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, p. 257. Taylor describes in detail the political life of one Jedediah Peck, a Revolutionary War veteran whose post-war life in many ways parallels Moulton's. Although Peck was much more successful in his political endeavors, both men attempted further the Republican/Democratic principles of the American Revolution on the New York frontier against the Federalist aristocracy.

and lower class citizens. This resurgence was temporarily eclipsed by the rise of the Federalists, only to reemerge in the early nineteenth century with the rise of the Democratic Party.⁸⁰ Moulton is one American whose democratic inclinations were forged in the Revolution, eclipsed by powerful Federalists who feared the masses, and finally vindicated in the politics New York's emerging Democratic Party. Moulton did not succumb to the democratizing influence of the frontier, he brought those inclinations with him to Wolcott.⁸¹ Drawing upon his experiences in the Revolution and at sea, Moulton was a life-long Democrat even before a coherent party existed.

Moulton's support of Daniel Tompkins in opposition to DeWitt Clinton illustrates his democratic political inclinations in action. As the Federalist Party declined in the early nineteenth century many Federalists came to support DeWitt Clinton for President in 1812 and continued to support him as Governor of New York thereafter. As Richard Hofstadter explains, "for a long time his conservative pronouncements, his promotional activities, and his easy association with the prominent men of the state had convinced the Federalists of his basic soundness."⁸² Daniel Tompkins, on the other hand, was identified with the Tammany Society and embraced a wider constituency. It consisted, among others, of Revolutionary war veterans who admired Republican France and despised monarchical England and immigrants and members of the lower classes who saw their political aspirations threatened by aristocratic Federalism.⁸³ Furthermore, Governor Tompkins' patriotic support of the War of 1812 was often held in contrast to Clinton's association with the subversive Federalists.⁸⁴

William Moulton's support of the war effort against England and his aversion to aristocratic institutions would have placed him in Tompkins' camp in New York's 1820 gubernatorial election. Moreover, backing Tompkins also would have run counter to the large land owners of the

80. Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 214.

81. See Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York, 1801-1840*, 2d. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), especially pp. 53-54, for the Turnerian idea that democratic politics in nineteenth century New York was a frontier-based innovation.

82. Hofstadter, *Idea of a Party System*, p. 221.

83. Ray W. Irwin, *Daniel D. Tompkins: Governor of New York and Vice President of the United States* (New York: The New York Historical Society, 1968), 36.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

area and a growing number of small farmers who supported Clinton's Erie Canal project.⁸⁵ Seemingly, in 1820, general support for internal improvements made Moulton part of a political minority in an area where the canal was an important political issue. Practical politics would overrule traditional ideological patterns in the Western counties of New York State. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Moulton was worried about losing his position as commissioner in 1820 for having supported Daniel Tompkins when Clinton won the election.

Moulton's involvement in Democratic politics should not come as a surprise given his experiences at sea. Moulton trusted his seal hunting companions to govern themselves rationally without powerful men to guide them and staunchly opposed the arbitrary rule of Captain Howe. However, as a Democratic politician Moulton was at a disadvantage residing in a township organized under Pulteney Estate agents. Allied with the Federalists, these agents would have felt threatened by an expanding democracy. For the landed gentry of the American frontier the preservation of order on their estates was more important than any perceived threats to individual liberties.⁸⁶ Many Federalists believed an overly inclusive democracy could lead to anarchy. If Moulton was to speak out against what he perceived to be the establishment of an aristocratic state within his beloved republic, he would have opened himself up to the wrath of powerful and influential men who were determined to maintain their place in a conservative, hierarchical social structure.

According to Moulton and his friend Daniel Roe, the wrath of his political opponents was unleashed in the year 1816. In a deposition accompanying Moulton's pension application, Roe testified that:

the said town [Wolcott] was governed by officers both civil and military who were head strong and ambitious, of the Boston and Hartford Convention Stamp, that the unceasing exertions of the said Moulton until the town was revolutionized, and the Civil and Military Officers were vested in the friends of the administration, procured for him the most implacable rancour of his opponents that disappointed ambition is capable of indulging, excited not only their detraction and odium, but groundless and vexatious litigation. . . . It is now more than two years since he the said Moulton fell sacrifice to the vilest machinations of his insidious opponents; not the consequence resulting from debt or crime but from breach of contract and covenant on the part of the

85. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

obligee, he has been swindled out of or lost a valuable estate in which is included his provision, stock, tools and farm, all is irrecoverably lost. . . .⁸⁷

According to the pension records Moulton was deprived of an estate worth approximately five thousand dollars and afterwards possessed a mere leasehold of less than thirty acres of land. Moreover, in 1818 he reportedly lived in an old log cabin and took in landless families to assist him in working his land. If we are to believe this morbid picture and not dismiss it as the exaggerated ramblings of an old man desiring to get money from the government, what could have led to such negative fortune?

Fortunately, we have one tantalizing piece of evidence which indicates that Moulton's political opponents may have been taking action against him as early as 1812, the very year that he claimed to have first "revolutionized" the town. On May 7, 1812 William Moulton, along with John W. Brown, Lot Stewart⁸⁸, and Milton Fuller, all farmers of Wolcott, came before the Seneca County Court of Oyer and Terminer and General Gaol Delivery and:

jointly and severally acknowledged themselves to owe to the people of the State of New York the sum of three thousand dollars lawful money of this state to be made and levied of their goods and chattles [sic] land and tenements respectively to the use of the said people if the said William Moulton shall make default in the condition following.⁸⁹

The "condition following" was that Moulton should appear at the next court session and answer to the charge of "being guilty of the crime against nature commonly called sodomy in having communion with a beast commonly called a bitch."⁹⁰ Moulton had been arrested on the said charge by a warrant issued by justice of the peace Osgood Church. Unable to post the required fifteen hundred dollars bail, Moulton had been kept in custody until the above recognizance freed him until the next court session.

87. Moulton, Pension Records. Roe's reference to men of the "Boston and Hartford Convention Stamp" could refer to the Federalist leanings of Moulton's opponents.

88. Lot Stewart also was a Revolutionary War veteran, described by one Contemporary as a "Revolutioner." Wadsworth, *Wolcott*, p. 99.

89. Seneca County Court Records, Waterloo, NY.

90. *Ibid.*

Attached to this document is the evidence collected against Moulton, consisting of four depositions as well as a brief statement by Moulton in which he refutes the charge claiming that he was unable to commit such a crime "on account of the general debility of his body at the time, occasioned by a bad wound on one of his legs."⁹¹ The first deposition is an eyewitness account given by a Levi Griswold who claimed to have stumbled upon him committing the said crime. According to the testimony, Griswold had just moved his family from Moulton's farm and was returning to assist Moulton with some fieldwork and collect some of his possessions. After meeting Moulton at his house, Moulton reportedly called for his dog and left the house. Griswold, thinking Moulton had gone out to work in the garden, went out to assist him; at that time he reportedly saw Moulton committing the alleged crime.

Another deposition is from John Gandy, who testified that Griswold told him of Moulton's alleged crime shortly after the incident occurred. The last two depositions refer to a deformed litter of puppies that Moulton's dog reportedly mothered. Mattanach Wollet testified that Moulton's dog came onto his father's farm and gave birth to puppies the likes of which he had never seen. Allegedly these puppies "had large heads resembling a person's head, they had arms like a persons, and long straight hind legs, no hair on them nor tails, and on the side of their head they had small ears. . . ."⁹² This testimony, corroborated by his father, was obviously an attempt to establish Moulton as the father of the puppies.

While I have not been able to locate evidence showing the results of the trial, this accusation may represent an attempt by Moulton's political enemies to exact revenge upon him. John Murrin has cited several instances in seventeenth century New England in which one community repeatedly accused its most conspicuous deviants of obliging pigs.⁹³ Several times the residents of New Haven attempted to link the birth of deformed pigs to its least desirable residents; such accusations became an accepted method of social control in the community. Did Moulton become a victim of similar devices instigated by his political opponents?

Daniel Roe's pension deposition cites "groundless and vexatious litigation" instigated by Moulton's political opponents and a "breach of

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid.

93. John M. Murrin, "Trial by Jury in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *Saints and Revolutionaries, Essays on Early American History*, ed. David D. Hall, John M. Murrin, Thad W. Tate (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 177-178.

contract and covenant” which deprived Moulton of his estate. While the above court case could easily qualify as “groundless and vexatious litigation,” the above recognizance is a contract entered into by Moulton which could have resulted in the loss of goods totaling three thousand dollars if the court found that he defaulted on its terms.⁹⁴ Quite possibly the court could have found Moulton in violation of this recognizance at a later date and deprived him of his estate, or at the very least this case serves as positive evidence that Moulton’s political opponents were taking action against him. Interestingly enough, the judge who served Moulton’s warrant and had him confined to jail was Osgood Church, Wolcott town supervisor and local agent for the Pulteney Estate. Furthermore, it is likely that this case resulted in Moulton’s loss of political office, as this accusation coincides with his removal from his position on the Seneca County Court of Common Pleas.⁹⁵ In any case, this court record serves as positive evidence, separate from Moulton’s own testimony, that he was in conflict with powerful and influential people in the region and that these men may have gone to extraordinary lengths to exact revenge upon him for his political activities. William Moulton may have effectively lost the final battle of his Revolution.

Moulton was an active member of his community in the final years of his life—he died in 1831—but not the important figure that he had once aspired to be. His participation in local affairs was mainly limited to surveying tracts of town land.⁹⁶ Whether or not Moulton’s misfortune was solely based upon his political activities is not as important as the fact that he perceived a conspiracy against himself and his country. As we have seen, late in life he feared that his political enemies had conspired to remove his name from the pension list. Moreover, he also worried that those opponents to whom he owed money would seek revenge by calling in his debts.⁹⁷ In the tradition of his *Sea Journal*, Moulton expressed in the pension letters his personal frustration in impersonal and highly political terms. Moulton’s enemies were always part of a conspiracy of power against liberty and against “the administration” which protected that liberty. His actions were always explained as nec-

94. Moulton states that the amount of property he was “shaved out of” totaled about five thousand dollars. See Moulton, pension records.

95. Seneca County Common Pleas Register, Vol. 1, Seneca County Records, Waterloo, NY.

96. Butler Minute Book #1, Butler Town Records, Butler, NY. Butler was formed from a portion of Wolcott, NY on which Moulton resided in the year 1826.

97. Moulton, Pension Records.

essary, patriotic behavior to defend and uphold liberty, as vested in the laws of the nation, against arbitrary power. Moulton's politics remained rooted in the ideology of the American Revolution and was the lens through which he viewed the events of his later life.

In this sense William Moulton may have attempted, by "revolutionizing" the town of Wolcott, to create a kind of mutiny on land that paralleled his opposition to George Howe aboard the *Onico* in 1800. Although history does not tell us exactly what Moulton's revolutionary actions were, his opposition to Howe's authority is consistent with his opposition to the powerful land agents of the Pulteney Estate. Aboard the *Onico* the crew was dependent upon the arbitrary will of George Howe and vulnerable to economic and social exploitation; on the New York frontier the tenants were subject to the political and economic control of the Pulteney Agency. Neither scenario left much room for the interests of the governed and therefore represented to Moulton all that he had fought against in the Revolution. Irrational and corrupt leadership, disregard for law, and exploitation of power were for him evils that perpetually threatened the continuing Revolution. In Moulton's ideal republic men were to be left free to govern themselves in accordance with the laws created by rational men and not be made dependent upon the arbitrary will of powerful aristocrats. Like the animals of Captain Cook's journal, men were to enter into a league which would allow each other to pursue their interests free from the corrupting influence of power. Moulton saw himself as a defender of this ideal against the practices of powerful, arbitrary authority figures.

One could argue that Moulton's many confrontations with authority were as much a result of personality conflicts as they were a result of political disagreements. One gains the impression from his writings that Moulton took himself quite seriously and, based on one first-hand account, he seemed to have fancied himself a gentleman. His advanced age and sense of self-importance (probably taken as arrogance) may have been an important source of friction between Howe and Moulton aboard the *Onico*. Furthermore, such arrogant behavior and high ambition from a sailor may have invited ridicule and resentment from the frontier aristocracy. In both cases, if we are to take Moulton at his word, it was political ideology and not personal grudges that caused him to challenge established authority. Moulton's arrogance may have invited trouble throughout his life, but politics drove the man; first-hand accounts of Moulton, his political activities, and his own writings all testify to the sincerity of his beliefs.

Sometimes the manner in which people explain their actions are as important as the motives that may have guided them at the time. The way Moulton explained his confrontations with authority was a product of a coherent political ideology, one which caused Moulton to view his life as a continuous revolutionary struggle against infringements upon his and others' liberty. His ideology made him a soldier in the Revolutionary War, a mutineer on the high seas, and a frontier Democrat in Western New York. In the end, history should view Major William Moulton as he pictured himself, a life-long soldier of the American Revolution.

Appendix

William Moulton's Land Transactions^{98*}

The 1,200 acres that Moulton was granted for his service in the Revolutionary War was located in two 600 acre plots numbered 37 and 82 of the military tract. One hundred acres of each tract granted to the veterans was relegated to the State of New York. Moulton mentions in his pension records that he sold his lands in 1798 only to repurchase them from a Benjamin Brayton in 1810. Moulton in turn sold Brayton 121 acres of his land for the same price which he had bought back his 1,200 acres. Moulton was married to a Martha Brayton, so Benjamin might have been a relative who Moulton charged with holding his land while he went on his South Seas voyage. The 121 acres may have been Moulton's way of repaying Brayton for his services. I have no record of the original 1798 sale so this is merely an assumption.

By 1818 Moulton had sold all 500 acres of lot 82, with 77 acres going to his son William B. Moulton. His final transaction to his son came one month before he first applied for his pension. This could have been either out of an effort to insure his pension eligibility or out of the realization that with the forthcoming pension he could now afford to transfer his land to his son.

Of his 500 acres of lot 37 I have only been able to locate the sale of 330 acres. Three hundred acres were sold in July, 1816, the very year that Moulton says he was swindled out of his estate. Moulton also mortgaged his lot 82 property to George Brayton in 1811. This mortgage was discharged in July 13, 1816, so the sale of land in lot 37 to George Brayton could have been to pay off his debt to the same man.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Grantor</u>	<u>Grantee</u>	<u>Location/Acreage</u>	<u>Price (\$)</u>
11/6/1810	B. Brayton	W. Moulton	Lots 37, 82 / 1,200	539.60
12/14/1810	W. Moulton	B. Brayton	Lot 82 / 121	539.00
10/23/1812	W. Moulton	H. Miner, J. Brown	Lot 82 / 90	453.75
12/15/1812	W. Moulton	P. Miner, C. Stephens	Lot 82 / 12	57.75
2/9/1813	W. Moulton	A. Brace	Lot 82 / 200	1000.00
7/12/1816	W. Moulton	G. Brayton	Lot 37 / 300	1200.00
1/6/1817	W. Moulton	A. Brace	Lot 82 / 99	500.00
11/1/1817	W. Moulton	J. Lathrop	Lot 37 / 30	240.00
3/19/1818	W. Moulton	W. B. Moulton	Lot 82 / 50	300.00
4/6/1818	W. Moulton	W. B. Moulton	Lot 82 / 27	162.00

98.* Land records were drawn from Cayuga County Deed Book K, 256-257; Book M, 552-553; Book N, 33-34, 157-158; Book R, 419-420; Book S, 136-137, 207; Book Y, 441-442; Cayuga County Mortgage Book C, 455-456; Seneca County Deed Book A, 261-262; Book L, 427-428; Book N, 72-73; Seneca County Mortgage Book A, 520.