

1751 proclamation by the governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony ordering the arrest of two men for publishing a ballad

“wherein are contained many Expressions horribly prophane and impious, and such also as reflect the greatest Indignity and Contempt upon the Authority of the Legislature, and tend very much to weaken, if not subvert the happy Constitution of this Government.”

# The “Old Tenor” Affair

Massachusetts Bay Colony  
 1751

“Old Tenor” was a nickname for paper money issued by the Massachusetts Bay colony. In 1751, the colonial assembly ordered the currency removed from circulation. Paper money had been a divisive issue for decades, as is apparent in a ballad published anonymously as a broadside. “A Mournful Lamentation for the sad and deplorable Death of Mr. Old Tenor.” The ballad infuriated the governor and assembly, and a proclamation ordering the arrest of the two men who published the broadside, Robert Howland and Fobes Little, was quickly forthcoming. .

The ballad and the proclamation are presented here, followed by the affidavits of two men who assert that they heard Robert Howland deliver the verses from memory.

The archival track of the “Old Tenor” affair ends here. No further documentation has come to light that records the outcome of the ballad and the officials' response.

National Humanities Center, 2009: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/). In *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society: From January to June 1874* (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1910), pp. 255-260. Complete image credits at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm).



## A MOURNFUL LAMENTATION

for the sad and deplorable Death of Mr. Old Tenor, A Native of New England who, after a long Confinement, by a deep and mortal Wound, which he received above Twelve Months before, expired on the 31<sup>st</sup> Day of Mary, 1750.

*He lived beloved, and died lamented. To the mournful Tune of, Chn-y-Chace.*

A Doleful tale prepare to hear,  
As ever yet was told:  
The like, perhaps, ne'er reach'd the ear  
Of either young or old.  
Tis of the sad and woeful death  
Of one of mighty fame,  
Who lately hath resign'd his breath;  
OLD TENOR was his Name.

In vain ten thousands intercede,  
To keep him from the grave;  
In vain his many good works plead;  
Alas! they cannot save.  
The powers decree, and die he must,  
It is the common lot,  
But his good deeds, when he's in dust,  
Shall never be forgot.

He made our wives and daughters fine,  
And pleased every body;  
He gave the rich their costly wine,  
The poor their flip and toddy.  
The labourer he set to work;  
In ease maintain'd the great:  
He found us mutton, beef and pork,  
And every thing we eat.

To fruitful fields, by swift degrees,  
He turn'd our desart land:  
Where once nought stood but rocks and trees,  
Now spacious cities stand.  
He built us houses strong and high,  
Of wood, and brick, and stone;  
The furniture he did supply;  
But now, alas! He's gone.

The merchants too, those topping folks,  
To him owe all their riches;  
Their ruffles, lace and scarlet cloaks,  
And eke their velvet breeches.  
He launch'd their ships into the main,  
To visit distant shores;  
And brought them back, full fraught with gain,  
Which much increas'd their stores.

Led on by him, our Soldiers bold,  
Against the foe advance;  
And took, in spite of wet and cold,  
Strong CAPE BRETON from *France*.  
Who from that *Fort* the *French* did drive,  
Shall he so soon be slain?  
While they alas! remain alive,  
Who gave it back again.

From house to house, and place to place,  
In *paper doublet* clad,  
He pass'd, and where he shew'd his face,  
He made the heart full glad.  
But cruel death, that spareth none,  
Hath rob'd us of him too;  
Who thro' the land so long hath *gone*,  
No longer now must *go*.

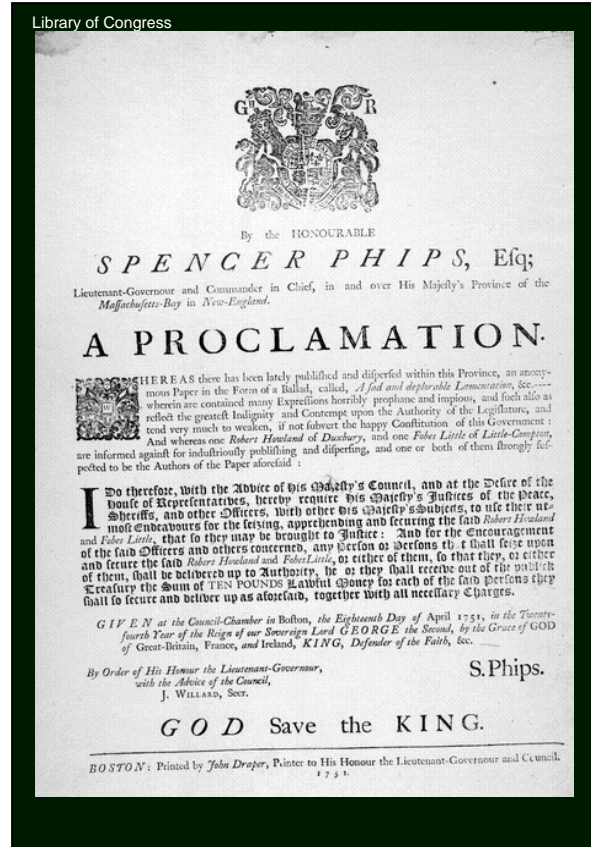
In *Senate* he, like *Cæsar*, fell,  
Pierc'd thro' with many a wound,  
He sunk, ah doleful tale to tell!  
The *members* sitting round.  
And ever since that fatal day,  
Oh! had it never been,  
Closely confin'd at home he lay,  
And scarce was ever seen.

Until the last of *March*, when he  
Submitted unto fate;  
*In anno Regis* twenty three,  
*Ætatis* forty eight.  
Forever gloomy be that day,  
When he gave up the ghost:  
For by his death, oh! who can say  
What hath *New-England* lost?

Then good OLD TENOR, fare thee well,  
Since thou art dead and gone;  
We mourn thy fate, e'en while we tell  
The good things thou hast done.  
Since the bright beams of yonder sun,  
Did on *New-England* shine,  
In all the land, there ne'er was known  
A death so mourn'd as thine.

Of every rank are many seen,  
Thy downfall to deplore;  
For 'tis well known that thou hast been  
A friend to rich and poor.  
We'll o'er thee raise a SILVER tomb,  
Long may that tomb remain,  
To bless our eyes for years to come,  
But wishes ah! are vain.

And so God bless our noble state,  
And save us all from harm,  
And grant us food enough to eat,  
And clothes to keep us warm.  
Send us a lasting peace, and keep  
The times from growing worse,  
And let us all in safety sleep,  
With SILVER in our purse.



By the Honourable

**SPENCER PHIPS, Esq;**

Lieutenant-Governour and Commander in Chief, in and over His Majesty's Province of the *Massachusetts-Bay* in *New-England*.

## A PROCLAMATION.

WHEREAS there has been lately published and dispersed within this Province, an anonymous Paper in the Form of a Ballad, called, *A sad and deplorable Lamentation, &c.* — wherein are contained many Expressions horribly prophane and impious, and such also as reflect the greatest Indignity and Contempt upon the Authority of the Legislature, and tend very much to weaken, if not subvert the happy Constitution of this Government: And whereas one *Robert Rowland* of *Duxbury*, and one *Fobes Little* of *Little-Compton*, are informed against for industriously publishing and dispersing, and one or both of them strongly suspected to be the Authors of the Paper aforesaid:

I Do therefore, with the Advice of His Majesty's Council, and at the Desire of the House of Representatives, hereby require His Majesty's Justices of the Peace, Sheriffs, and other Officers, with other His Majesty's Subjects, to use their utmost Endeavours for the seizing, apprehending and securing the said *Robert Howland* and *Fobes Little*, that so they may be brought to Justice: And for the Encouragement of the said Officers and others concerned, any Person or Persons that shall seize upon and secure the said *Robert Howland* and *Fobes Little*, or either of them, so that they, or either of them, shall be delivered up to Authority, he or they shall receive out of the publick Treasury the Sum of TEN POUNDS Lawful Money for each of the said Persons they shall so secure and deliver up as aforesaid, together with all necessary Charges.

*GIVEN at the Council-Chamber in Boston, the Eighteenth Day of April 1751, in the Twenty-fourth Year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord GEORGE the Second, by the Grace of GOD of Great-Britain, France, and Ireland, KING, Defender of the Faith, &c.*

*By Order of His Honour the Lieutenant-Governour, with the Advice of the Council,* S. Phips.

J. WILLARD, Secy.

**G O D Save the KING.**

*BOSTON: Printed by John Draper, Printer to His Honour the Lieutenant-Governour and Council. 1751.*



[C]ertain papers in the Massachusetts Archives . . . would indicate that the writer or writers of the verses sought to avoid the consequences of their act by having them printed in Rhode Island.<sup>1</sup>

Prov : of            To James Warren Esq<sup>r</sup> Sheriff of the County of Plymouth  
 the                    or to either of Hia Deputies  
 Mass<sup>a</sup>  
 Bay.                 Greeting

In His Majesty's Name You are hereby required and impowered forthwith to take the Bodies of Robert Howland of Duxborough Hezekiah Cane of Pembroke and Jethro Sprague of Duxbrough into your Custody and bring them before this House to give Answer for their Contempt of the Order of this House and such other matters as shall be laid to their Charge.

Given under my Hand and Seal in the Chamber of the House of Representatives this Ninth Day of April. Anno Domini 1751. And in the 24th Year of His Maj<sup>ty</sup> Reign

T. HUBBARD Spk.<sup>r</sup>

The following entry of the return of this warrant is endorsed on the back of it:

Plym<sup>o</sup> ss April y<sup>e</sup> 10 : 1751

then persuant to Warrant I have tuck the Bodeys [of] y<sup>e</sup> with In Named Hezekiah Keen and Jethro Sprage and them Brout Before the Honorabel house of Representifes and I have made deligent Sarch for the with[in] named Robert howland and Cold not find him with in my present [precinct]

pr JOSEPH JOSSELYN  
 Dep<sup>t</sup> Sheriff

Nath.<sup>l</sup> Churchill of Plymouth of lawfull age testify's & says that he was at the house of Jethro Sprague in Duxborough on Monday 11th March past, where were severall Persons & being askt by s<sup>d</sup> Sprague whether he had ever heard the Verses on the Death of Old Tenor I told him no, whereupon he desired us to sit down & we should, upon this he called upon one Robert Howland who was then at Spragues house, smoaking his pipe, to say or repeat them, at first he seemed somewhat backward, but afterwards taking his pipe out of his mouth, he repeated in the hearing of myself & severall other persons then present a Number of Verses, on the Lamentation of the Death of Old Tenor. Afterwards Joseph Morton & myself went out of the House in order to pursue a person who had broke out of Plymouth Goal [sic; Jail] & (as we heard) was in Duxbury, said Howland told us he was going that way & would show us the House where y<sup>e</sup> person was, & as we were rideing along, he heard the s<sup>d</sup> Howland tell s<sup>d</sup> Morton, that the s<sup>d</sup> Verses were gone severall weeks before, to R<sup>d</sup> Island in order to be printed & that he believed he would hear more of them hereafter; And since that I have seen some Verses printed, which according to the best of my remembrance I verily believe to be the same I heard repeated by the s<sup>d</sup> Robert Howland, which contained severall very hard reflections on the Generall Court I further say not

NATHANIEL CHURCHEL

SUFFOLK ss.

BOSTON 1st April 1751.

Nath<sup>l</sup> Churchill appeared & made solemn oath that the above Deposition by him subscribed is just & true Before me

T. HUBBARD J Peace

In the affidavit of Joseph Morton, Jr., of Plymouth, to the same effect, he states that on the "fryday or Saterdag following [March 11, 1751] Thomas Foster Esq<sup>r</sup> Shew me a printed Copy of Verses which I took to be . . . the Same Verses." It also appears that there were two or three sets or renderings of these doggerel lines, and it is likely that the more offensive were not contained in the printed sheet.

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society: From January to June 1874* (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1910), pp. 259-260.