

Riot on Main Street? (220 years ago...)

by Doris Sherrow, May 2000

At 10 o'clock on the night of June 14, 1780, Justice of the Peace **Ebenezer White** was "call'd out of my Bed and Inform'd of a Riot at **Noadiah Whites**." Noadiah White lived at 492 Main Street, in the house owned by the Portland Historical Society. Ebenezer, Noadiah's cousin, lived just up the street, at 582 Main. Unfortunately Ebenezer gives no details on who did what to whom. But various legal papers illuminate the controversy.

Seth Overton was a 21-year-old who, as a teenager, had been forced to flee his home in Long Island when the British invaded in 1776. He was living with Noadiah White, having married his daughter **Mehitabel** a year before. They had a three-month-old son, and he was in the process of building a house on the site of present-day 506 Main. Overton was a sailor - in the next two years, he would command privateers in the Revolutionary effort.

But in June of 1780, he was offering for sale from his father-in-law's house a large amount of British goods. You remember, of course, the Boston Tea Party, and the boycotting of tea and other British products? By 1780, Americans, initially glad to boycott British luxuries like tea and silk, had discovered that sassafras tea and homespun were sad substitutes, and they longed for the real articles. Consequently there was a market for such things.

And there were ways to get them. A strong trade had grown up in questionably obtained British goods. These could be acquired by going to New York and pretending that you had a British clientele on Long Island to supply, or by seizing them from another ship in what could be described as either piracy or privateering. The Connecticut government had little quibble with such seizing, even writing one letter of commission to allow its holder to engage in "the Illicit Trade."

Probably Seth Overton was involved in illicit trade of one sort or another. After all, he was an ambitious young man, with a socially-connected young wife, a new baby, and a two-story house in the works.

Worse yet, he had a boat full of wheat, rice, and Indian corn, and permission from the state government to sail on to Long Island and give it to the British. Hence the "Riot."

Perhaps he did intend to bring the ship full of grain to Long Island. His parents had fled with the rest of the Long Islanders in 1776, but they had gone back not long after. For one thing, they, like the other refugees, had left their home, their livestock, their crops, their tools - their whole lives - on the island, and needed to go back to survive. For another, they felt that their advanced age would spare them from any real abuse by the British. This proved not to be the case.

Soon on the night of June 14, 1780, young Overton waited at Noadiah White's with his wife and baby son, a passel of British goods for sale, and a ship full of wheat, rice, and Indian corn on the nearby Connecticut River.

Several men from the "downstreet" area came to try to seize Overton's grain before it headed out of port. Ebenezer White lists ten names involved in the "Riot." **Deliverance** and **Thomas Cooper** probably lived near Pacouset in the vicinity of Marlborough Street. **George Ranny Jr.** lived at 86 Marlborough Street. **Joel Hall** and **Jonathan Bush** lived on Main Street somewhere between Marlborough and Commerce streets. **Abraham Baley's** house still stands out on Sand Hill Road; only **Ithamar Pelton** lived in Overton's neighborhood, at 613 Main Street. (Research to date has not shown where **Tomas Ranny**, **Daniel Stow**, or **Joseph Pelton Jr.** lived.)

It is curious that most of the opposition came from another neighborhood. There were plenty of people living near Overton who could have protested if they felt he was a traitor.

Ebenezer White kept the peace, but another outbreak occurred the next night: "P.M." writes Ebenezer wryly, "another comp[an]y at Serg't White's with Design to take Seth Overton's goods [They] tarried until in ye night but Did not take [the]m."

On the 16th of June, **Captain Joseph Kellogg** and **Dr. Moses Bartlett** went to the General Assembly and had Overton's permit to go to Stonington invalidated. The next day, **Captain Churchel**, who lived in the colonial house which stood where Dunkin Donuts is (152 Main), tried to get Ebenezer to authorize the confiscation of Overton's grain. When White refused for lack of a bond, Churchel returned with Tom Cooper and Tom Ranney, and White finally had his 26-year-old son David take the grain, as much for safekeeping as for seizure.

On June 21st, White went with young Overton up to the Assembly in Hartford, both to "assist him to get Pay for his Grain" and to "Clear up his Carracter." Obviously Ebenezer White liked this young man.

Four months later, Seth Overton petitioned the General Assembly to allow him to bring his elderly parents out of Long Island. The Assembly refused. A week later, Ebenezer White recorded, "...the same old leavon rise about Seth Overton at Capt. Hall's..." Probably "leavon rise" alludes to the rising of leavening - yeast, for example - what we might call "ferment." Apparently some of the townsmen still suspected Overton of Tory leanings.

On March 23rd of 1781, the Assembly reimbursed Overton "1:14:9 gold & silver" according to White's journal. That July, he signed on as a commander of the privateer Regulator, which captured the British ship Restoration and her cargo of arms two months later. In December of 1782, Overton, commanding the **Governor Clinton**, captured the Dolphin carrying fuel and provisions to the British garrison at New York. No more was his patriotism questioned.

Seth and Mehitabel lived out their lives at the house he had built that troublesome year; they had four more children. She lived to 74, and Overton married again three years later. In his later years, he cut a colorful figure in town, being "General Overton" by this time, and wearing a navy blue uniform with brass buttons. He died at age 93.