PROLOGUE: NEW YORK CITY, FEBRUARY 9, 1775

“It is a matter of liberty, sir.”¹ That word, “liberty,” caught your attention. You looked up from your tankard of stonewall, a hard cider fortified with rum. The words were spoken by a young man, perhaps not twenty, seated alone, staring down at the table. He was dressed in the fashion of the radicals: brown coat made of homespun broadcloth, not fabric manufactured in England, without collar or lapel. His hair, unpowdered, was cut so short that it required no braids in the back.

“Liberty, is it?” answered an older man, seated at an adjacent table with a British officer in a resplendent red uniform. The older man looked at the radical, awaiting a response with a forced smile on his face. He was heavyset, and wore a long, deep green waistcoat of corded silk, with red and yellow embroidery, over a shirt with lace cuffs and collar. His wig, powdered and clean, was white.

“You call it liberty when a man can’t dock his ship?” the older man continued, speaking to the younger. “What about my liberty?”

The keeper of the tavern looked up, spoon in hand. She had been frothing eggs to add to the flip, a concoction of beer, sugar, cream, and rum. “Then you must be Watson, captain of the James out of Glasgow?” she asked.

“That I am.”

“Tried to dock at Murray’s last week?” she asked.

“I did indeed,” Watson said. “And again today, this time with the help of Captain Montagu.” He lifted his tankard in salute to the officer.

The men at a table near the fireplace fell silent and glanced at each other.

“Last week we had just sailed past the narrows,” Watson continued. “I set the James on a course for Murray’s, dodging ice from the Hudson all the way. Then a sloop tacks our way, its deck swarming with armed men. ‘They’re pirates,’ one of my crew yells. ‘Can’t be pirates,’ I say. ‘They’re too fat.’ Then one of the brigands on the sloop shouts at me. ‘Turn back,’ he says, ‘Or we’ll seize your boat and crew.’ I responded with all due courtesy.”

¹ This prologue was contributed by Mark C. Carnes, Professor of History, Barnard College, Columbia University.
The officer guffawed.

“So the sloop follows us into Murrays. When we approach the dock, Murray’s men, seeing the ruckus on the sloop, refuse to take my ropes. So I sail over to the Jersey shore and anchor near the oyster beds.”

The tavern keeper, carrying a tankard, walked toward Watson and set it down. Watson raised it to his lips, sniffed the egg-white foam, and took a deep drink.

“Tis good indeed,” he declared. “Everyone said that I’d find the best flip in all of New York at the tavern of the Widow de la Montagne and they were right. To you, madam, and to the King”—he raised the mug toward the picture of King George III on the far wall.

The men by the fireplace rose from their table and slipped out the door.

“The sloop captain—that was either Sears or McDougall,” the widow explained. “In charge of the Liberty Men. You’re fortunate they didn’t board the ship and seize your cargo.”

“Lucky they didn’t try,” the captain said. “I’d have stuck them with my sword.”

“And you, sir, would have been arrested,” the young man again spoke up. “They were doing their duty.”

“Their duty, you say?” Watson asked, setting down his tankard. “You,” he said, and repeated the word with emphasis, “YOU speak to me of duty? I am captain of a 600-ton ship. What of my duty to the owners of that ship. My duty to the owners of the cargo? My duty to the crew? What do you know of duty?” He then ended his questions by muttering something to the British officer and they both laughed.

“I know, sir, that you should not have sailed for New York,” the young man replied.

“Is that so?” Watson’s smile was gone.

“Last September,” the young man continued, “the Continental Congress in Philadelphia voted to put an end to all shipping to or from England. This was in retaliation for Parliament and King George closing the Boston port.”

“They closed the port,” Watson growled, “because pirates like your Sears had dumped a shipload of East India tea into the Boston harbor. That was in December of 1773, over a year ago.”
“And so”—the young man continued, ignoring Watson’s words—“the Continental Congress instructed every town throughout the colonies to elect a committee—” here he pulled a broadsheet out of his pocket, unfolded it, and read aloud—“whose business it shall be attentively to observe the conduct of all persons touching this association; and when it shall be made to appear, to the satisfaction of a majority of any committee, that any person within the limits of their appointment has violated this association, that such majority do forthwith cause the truth of the case to be published in the gazette; to the end that all such foes to the rights of British-American may be publicly known, and universally condemned as the enemies of American liberty; and thenceforth we respectively will break off all dealings with him or her.”

“The vote selecting the New York committee was held at the intersection just outside the tavern,” the widow added. “Hundreds of men shouting out their votes—and calling for drinks. They way I heard it, Rum and Cider won the election by a landslide.”

The tavern erupted in laughter. One man, with a frizzy white beard, piped up: “Rum or Cider, Delanceys or Livingstons, what’s the difference?”

“After you’ve had your fill of any of ‘em,” the widow added, “your head will ache in the morning.”

More laughter.

“You’re wrong,” the young man declared. “Well, maybe not in the past. New York elections used to be tug-o-war between the Delanceys and Livingstons—but no more. The Liberty Men won, and they’ll win the election for the new Provincial Congress next month. Things will change now.”

“The Liberty Men won because Sears was working for Livingston,” the bearded man said. “Next time he’ll be on Delancey’s payroll.”

“That’s a lie,” the young man said.

“I didn’t vote for Sears or for the Liberty Men or Livingston,” another man said, coat covered by a mechanics apron. He stood up and walked towards Watson’s table, hat in hand. “Excuse me, sir,” he said. “I’m not afraid to unload your cargo, and there are plenty more carters like me down by the wharves.”

“I thank you,” Watson replied. “But your Liberty Men—your *dutiful* Liberty Men—have deprived you and me both of the liberty of earning a living. Earlier
today I again failed to bring the James into Murray’s. Captain Montagu here of His Majesty’s warship Kingfisher escorted me in; he even put armed soldiers aboard the James. But someone must have tipped off Sears, because when the James approached Murrays, a mob scrambled onto the dock.”

“Some of them were yelling like Indians,” Montagu added. “Homage, I suppose, to the ruffians who dumped the Boston tea. I called off the landing because the mob would have destroyed the cargo and sunk the James.”

“Why didn’t you get help from Fort George?” the cartman asked. “They must have seen what was going on. One volley of musket fire and the mob would have run to Westchester.”

“That’s what the merchants who owned my cargo told the Governor a few hours ago,” Watson said. “But the Governor said that his authority was being ‘superseded,’ as he put it. He said that the Liberty Men, if provoked, might run amuck and burn down the town. Isn’t that right, Montagu?”

“The Governor’s concern was not unfounded,” Montagu replied. “I’m sure you noticed that the cannon at the Fort are not aimed toward the harbor, but at the city itself. Nowadays we worry more about armed ruffians in New York than the Indians or the French. Some in the Crown government propose that, for safety, we move out of Fort George and onto the Asia, anchored in the Hudson.”

“I, for one, am leaving for Barbados,” Watson declared. “On the tide tomorrow morning.”

“But maybe around sunset”—the words came from a man who was sitting alone by the kitchen—“perhaps you’ll change your mind. Perhaps you’ll turn around, sail up the East River and unload your cargo on one of the hidden coves opposite Montressor’s island at midnight. Right, captain?”

“Try and they’ll catch you,” the young man warned. “Sears and the Committee on Inspection are on the look-out for smugglers.”

“They needn’t trouble themselves about the James,” Watson sniffed. “I’ve had my fill of New York. A wondrous colony indeed. A breeding place for pirates and smugglers.”


“A breeding ground, too, for spies,” the widow whispered, glancing toward the
door, through which another man had just departed. “I suggest you lower your voice.”

“I’ve had enough of this liberty,” Watson spat out the word, and turned toward the young man. “You speak of liberty,” Watson called out, “but perhaps you should read the words of John Locke. Ever heard of him? About a century ago, he wrote wise things. He said that if a man’s property is not secure, he has no liberty. He is slave to his belly, or to anyone who has power.”

“But we have no liberty now,” the young man replied. “You should read McDougall’s ‘Statement of Grievances’—”


“—the King and Parliament impose unconstitutional taxes,” the young man continued, “they suspend our legislatures, they ignore our courts—”

“And so you promote liberty through thievery and assault,” Watson retorted.

“Look at the counties along the Hudson,” the cartman exclaimed. “Mobs are burning manor houses and farms and seizing land. That’s not liberty, that’s chaos.”

“It’s not easy to break the chains of our bondage, but if we fail to do so, we’ll remain slaves,” the young man countered.

“What about Black Dan there?” another man asked, gesturing to the black man who was carrying a keg of rum from the cellar. “You give him liberty and he’ll slit the Widow’s throat.”

Black Dan set down the keg, picked up a long knife, and fingered the blade, testing its sharpness. He opened his eyes wide and smiled innocently.

The tavern roared with laughter.

Then the door burst open and a dozen men rushed inside. “I am Alexander McDougall of the Committee on Inspection and I arrest Captain Watson of the James for violating the orders of the Continental Association as set forth by the Continental Congress. . . .”

“Damn your eyes, you bloody sot,” Watson said, standing and raising the tankard as if to strike McDougall. The Liberty Men rushed at Watson and knocked him
onto the floor. One man kicked him furiously. Montagu tried to intervene but quickly was overwhelmed as more Liberty Men poured into the tavern.

“Parade ‘em through the streets,” one of them shouted.

Watson and Montagu were dragged from the tavern. Outside, a crowd cheered. Within a few minutes, as the procession made its way south, the tavern fell silent. You found yourself alone in the tavern with only the widow and Black Dan.

“Here’s a shoe with a silver buckle,” the Widow said. “And a wig, trampled into the dirt floor.”

“They broke the picture of King George,” Black Dan said.

“Just sweep up the glass and throw the picture away,” the widow said. “It riles people.”

While collecting glasses and plates, she asked: “What do you make of this talk of liberty?”

Black Dan paused. “I like the words of the Liberty Men. But I ask myself: Why do they talk of liberty when they own so many slaves? Not like you, but the big planters from Virginia with whole fields of slaves? I like the Livingstons—and the Delanceys—because I always like rich people. I like King George and Parliament because they own Fort George and a mighty fleet. Slaves like those who can help them.”

“But I help you,” the widow said.

“Yes, Madam, that you do,” Black Dan replied, “and I appreciate it. Give me a few more shilling each week and I’d appreciate it more.”

“But you’d just buy your freedom and leave.”

“That I would,” he said, smiling broadly. “As that boy said, ‘It’s all a matter of liberty.’”

Now she laughed. “Who do you hope wins the elections for the Provincial Congress?”

The slave paused. “Don’t think it much matters. It all depends on who controls New York at the end of the day. The rest of it’s just words, ain’t it?”
A WALK THROUGH THE CITY

You wake up the next morning with the events of Montagne’s Tavern still ringing in your ears. They are all the more tangible as you walk, onto Broadway, and see the problems facing New York. It is April 1, an early spring morning, and Broadway’s paving stones are heaving up after a hard winter of frost and thaw, leaving holes and mud and ruts in one of New York’s few “paved” streets. Across Broadway is the Commons, a roughly ten-acre space at the northern edge of town, the largest unbuilt upon area left on the southern tip of Manhattan. The mud is rampant, as the new grass is trod down and munched upon by various horses, cattle, and pigs owned by the town residents. The animals have left their dung everywhere, and the warm spring air scented by the sea carries their fragrance, reminding all of the daily rhythms of agriculture and nature in this most urban of colonial places. As these smells mix with last night’s words in your mind, you can’t help wondering, “Who will control all of this in the end?” Everywhere you look you see a possible answer to this question—but none are fully convincing.

Just to your left, at the north end of the grassy field are the barracks built to house British soldiers, empty now because their commanding officers have thought their men safer at the foot of the island at Fort George and on board His Majesty’s ship, Asia, floating in dock on the East River. Next to the barracks is the city’s new poorhouse, overflowing with young men compelled to become residents thanks to a decade of economic upheaval that left them with few opportunities. Beyond the poorhouse is the new jail, named Bridewell to mimic London’s prison, with a conveniently located public gallows right in front. You wonder how much business the hangman will have in the next year, not from the usual crimes but from the political turmoil engulfing this town. You have heard the word “treason” bandied about, and you know that traditionally traitors get hanged by the neck but not until dead; instead they have their intestines cut out and shown to them while hanging still alive on the gibbet. This practice is referred to as “drawing,” which was customarily followed by decapitation and the attaching of arms and legs to four horses, “quartering” the traitor before a raucous crowd. That is certainly one way to determine who will be in control in the end.

But just who are the traitors? Treason requires disloyalty to one’s country, giving aid and comfort to your country’s enemies, but right now, what should you be loyal to? To one’s King and the British Empire the Loyalists claim—to your colony and to liberty say the Patriots. Each says the other is the true enemy of the people of New York, and right there on the Commons is the focal point of much bloodshed so far: a “Liberty Pole.” Planted deep into the now soft soil is the fifth such pine tree shorn of its branches and rising forty feet in the air, defended by a half-dozen scruffy Patriots day and night. The first Pole went up as part of the Stamp Act resistance nearly ten years ago, and melees have broken out repeatedly around the
various Poles, as British soldiers and Loyalists have gone to chop it down and Patriots have rushed to defend it as if the fate of this piece of wood determined the future of the world. In many ways, the Pole is nothing more than a symbol of political chaos and disorder, a cynical reminder that this year’s traitor is next year’s hero. The winners define who are the traitors, but who will win control of this city—that is for you (and this game) to determine.

You walk down Broadway now, south toward the tip of the island; it is only about a mile, a twenty-minute walk as you carefully step around the mud and dung. To the right is St. Paul’s Chapel, an Anglican outpost of the dominant religious authority, the Church of England, favored by Loyalists. But the spire is not all you see, for the land beyond the church is the “holy ground,” the largest concentration of prostitution and brothels in the city. You don’t see much activity from the denizens of the holy ground this morning—most of their business is transacted at night—but you do see dozens of men and women on Broadway, going about their daily routines. None can be self-sufficient living in town, so women need to go out and acquire food and fuel (firewood), often trading eggs and milk that they produce at home. Other young men are out and about, hungrily looking for a day’s worth of pay, on the docks, in the warehouses, or in the many small shops. Artisans run most of these shops, where one can get handmade-to-order goods like shoes, clothing, hats, and furniture—these are small manufacturing sites as well as stores. Other men are opening their front doors or their stalls in the open-air Oswego Market—shopkeepers and merchants showing all sorts of products brought into the city from distant lands like Queens, Staten Island, and Albany, as well as from London, Jamaica, and the Orient. If the Patriots have their way, soon those store shelves will be empty, because they want to stop importation through what they call a Continental Association. This is their way of helping the beleaguered residents of Massachusetts groaning under the Intolerable Acts. Groaning too, and much closer than Boston, are the slaves you see on the street, black men working construction or driving fancy carriages for wealthy merchants.

As you walk a little further, and look to the left, you see a small field, Golden Hill, where in 1770 British soldiers sliced open Patriots in a melee following the felling of the fourth Liberty Pole. But what you most notice are the many churches, seemingly from all lands. By the time you reach Trinity Church, the headquarters for the Church of England in America, you have seen houses of worship for the different Dutch, Moravian, German, and French congregations. Along with the dominant Anglicans, there are Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Quakers, Methodists, and even a few Jews here, and you wonder how New York could ever be united: how could so many different people ever be ruled by one government or king? From Trinity, you can look down Wall Street all the way to the East River and see ships unloading their cargoes, including slaves at a market where Wall Street meets the river. Continuing down Broadway, the houses are more tightly packed together as you approach the Bowling Green, set up by the Dutch in the 1600s as a market, now
a park with flowers and lawn bowling lanes. At the north end of Bowling Green sits a tall statue of King George III on a horse, commissioned and erected by the grateful citizens of New York in 1770 to celebrate the King’s beneficent role in getting the Stamp Act repealed. But beyond this symbol is the harsh reality of British authority, Fort George, the home of the Royal Governor Tryon, with cannons to defend the city’s harbor and a garrison of men trained in modern military tactics and weapons—the British Army. You note the truth of Montagu’s statement last night—the cannons are directed at the city! Such political and military forces as these recently destroyed the French in the world war that ended in 1763; what hope would New York’s divided people have against such an array should the British choose to flex their muscles?

As you walk along the water’s edge at the tip of Manhattan, you see the sails of ships in the water of New York harbor. Some are headed over to Brooklyn, some headed up the river, some headed out to sea, some are inbound with goods from the Caribbean and England, and some are just sitting and rotting in drydock, waiting for better trade conditions. Flying the flag of empire, the Union Jack, and sitting in a berth on the East River, is the Asia, a proud warship armed with cannons capable of sinking any enemy ship likely to enter the harbor—and also capable of firing a broadside sufficient to level multiple buildings at once. What flag will fly over the harbor this time next year? Will this seemingly never-ending turmoil result in war, and if so, who will win? You know that in times like these, many people could be destroyed, but many others are capable of using their wits and their muscles to take advantage of the situation. You compare the movement in the water with what you’ve seen on land, and you resolve not to get stuck like those ships still in port. In the current crisis, you will act, you will prevail, for yourself and your children, for the good of New York.

To do that, you will need to understand New York’s political dynamics, both in recent history and in the newly assembled Provincial Congress. You continue to think as you walk north on Broad Street toward City Hall at the corner of Broad and Wall, the meeting place for the ninety-three representatives from all over the colony who will gather tomorrow to begin charting the future for your colony, your city. You will need many candles tonight, to read and understand the philosophical and historical foundations of the various political positions and factions. You will need to understand the people, their personal histories and motives. You will need information about what is going on in Boston, in Philadelphia, in Williamsburg, in London, and in the backrooms of Manhattan taverns where talk flows freely and plans (plots?) are hatched. You need to read deeply, you need to study, you need to think strategically, you need to anticipate and adjust, and you need ultimately to persuade others to follow your opinion as to what is to be done at every turn.

You are now at the steps leading up to City Hall, with its doors open to the future. There is not much time, and you must get to work, for you know that your life will
soon become transformed by the events about to occur. There is no doubt that the coming experience will make you a different person, a prospect that both thrills and terrifies you. You must be fully engaged, mentally, physically, and emotionally; you must go beyond the limits of what you already know (or think you know) about everything to achieve your mission: to prevail in the struggle for New York.

What follows next you should consider your briefing book in your journey to define the future of New York. It contains a historical summary of critical social and political events leading up to this point, the basic procedures of this game, a scouting report on some of the people you will meet, and a set of documents well-known and well-read at the time. You should begin to think as if you are in New York in 1775; your classmates are your fellow colonial New Yorkers who know the material here as well as you do. It is through total immersion in the time, place, and persona that you will see the revolutionary experience as a contingent one, where men and women made their own history, but within the constraints of their time. Your identity, just like your liberty, exists within the particular context of New York in 1775.