**5 Myths of Tarring and Feathering**

by J. L. Bell

**1. Myth: Tarring and feathering could be fatal.**

The notion that hot tar caused severe, sometimes fatal burns is based on the assumption that “tar” meant the asphalt we use on roads, which is typically stored in liquid state at about 300°F (150°C). But in the eighteenth century “tar” meant pine tar, used for several purposes in building and maintaining ships. As any baseball fan knows, pine tar doesn’t have to be very hot to be sticky. Shipyards did warm that tar to make it flow more easily, but pine tar starts to melt at about 140°F (60°C). That’s well above the ideal for bathwater, but far from the temperature of hot asphalt.

Pine tar could be hot enough to injure someone. The Loyalist judge Peter Oliver complained that when a mob attacked Dr. Abner Beebe of Connecticut, “hot Pitch was poured upon him, which blistered his Skin.” But other victims of tarring and feathering didn’t mention severe or lasting burns among their injuries. Rioters probably applied the tar with a mop or brush, lowering its temperature. Sometimes they tarred people more gently over their clothing.

Tarring and feathering undoubtedly caused pain and a lot of discomfort and inconvenience. But above all it was supposed to be embarrassing for the victim. Mobs performed the act in public as a humiliation and a warning—to the victim and anyone else—not to arouse the community again. There are no examples of people in Revolutionary America dying from being tarred and feathered.

**2. Myth: Rebellious Bostonians invented the tars-and-feathers treatment.**

Some incidents of tar and feathers in pre-Revolutionary Boston became notorious emblems of American violence. That assault on John Malcolm inspired the British artist Philip Dawe to create a print titled “The Bostonian’s Paying the Excise-Man, or Tarring & Feathering.”

But the first example of such an assault in pre-Revolutionary America took place in the port of Norfolk, Virginia, in March 1766. A sea captain named William Smith wrote that seven men, including the mayor, had “bedawbed my body and face all over with tar and afterwards threw feathers upon me.” Those merchants and mariners also threw rotten eggs and stones at the captain, carted him “through every street in the town” with “two drums beating,” and finally tossed him off a wharf. The rioters had accused Smith of informing a royal official about a smuggler, though he denied that.

As the historian Ben Irvin found in a thorough survey of Revolutionary tarring and feathering, the next documented examples occurred in Salem and Newburyport, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1768.

In the fall of 1769 the practice popped up in New Haven, New York, and Philadelphia. Newspapers reporting these incidents described the process of tarring and feathering in detail, indicating that readers were not yet familiar with it.

When the punishment came to Boston, it appears that the first instigators were mariners from out of town.

A clear pattern emerges in reports of those early attacks: waterfront crowds tarred and feathered men who had busted smuggling operations. The punishment appears to have been a traditional form of maritime mobbing.

Once the Townshend duties of 1767 made smuggling and anti-smuggling the focus of the dispute between colonists and the London government, that gave tar and feathers political meaning.

**3. Myth: Pre-war mobs attacked high-class royal officials with tar and feathers**.

In 1767 the London government appointed five Commissioners of the Customs for North America and put their headquarters in Boston. From the start those men were the focus of mariners’ resentment and criticism. At different times mobs surrounded their houses or chased them across the countryside. But none of those men were ever tarred and feathered. Nor were their high-level deputies, such as the collectors and inspectors. Nor were other royal appointees like governors, judges, sheriffs, or justices of the peace.

Instead, pre-Revolutionary crowds reserved tar and feathers mainly for working-class Customs employees and other common men: tide-waiters and land-waiters, sailors on Customs ships, informers, and laborers who supported the Crown. British colonists lived in a deferential society in which everyone expected gentlemen to receive gentler treatment than the mass of ordinary men. Sometimes people would stick tar and feathers on a wealthy merchant’s shop or, as in rural Marlborough, Massachusetts, in June 1770, on a gentleman’s horse, but they did not attack those men themselves.

The closest a Boston mob came to tarring and feathering a gentleman occurred on 19 June 1770 when people seized Patrick McMaster, a Scottish-born merchant who was defying the town’s “non-importation” boycott on goods from Britain. Men placed him in a cart beside a barrel of tar.

In fact, it appears that tarring and feathering someone was a way to communicate that he wasn’t a gentleman, just as clubbing or horsewhipping a man was a way to signal that he wasn’t genteel enough to challenge to a duel.

As the Revolutionary War drew closer, class deference crumbled a little. In September 1774 a crowd in East Haddam, Connecticut, tarred the physician and mill owner Abner Beebe. Soon after the war began, in the summer of 1775, there was an explosion of tarring and feathering across many colonies. Still, such attacks on upper-class men remained exceptions to the general pattern.

**4. Myth: Towns displayed tar barrels and bags of feathers on Liberty Poles.**

Liberty Poles were flagpoles displaying the British Union flag. In 1769 a contingent of soldiers stationed in New York pulled down such a flagpole outside a tavern popular with local Whigs, evidently angered by their claim to superior patriotism. The locals built a taller pole. When soldiers toppled that, too, the New Yorkers put up an even stronger one and called it a “Liberty Pole.” That tussle, reported in the newspapers, made Liberty Poles into a symbol of patriotic stubbornness. (The two sides also brawled, of course.) As America’s political conflict heated up in the early 1770s, towns vied to erect the tallest Liberty Pole around. But those poles displayed flags, not tar and feathers.

A tar barrel did appear beside a pole in Williamsburg, Virginia, in November 1774. A Loyalist merchant named James Parker told a friend, “At Wmsbg there was a Pole erected by Order of Col. Archd. Cary, a strong Patriot, opposite the Raleigh tavern upon which was hung a large mop & a bag of feathers, under it a bbl [barrel] of tar.”[xvii] Neither Parker nor another witness called that pole a “Liberty Pole,” and neither reported a flag as part of this threatening display.

Inspired by that report, in early 1775 Philip Dawe the printmaker published a political cartoon titled “The Alternative of Williams-Burg.” In the background of that picture stands a pole in the unmistakable shape of a gallows. Instead of leaving the heavy tar barrel on the ground, as Parker’s description suggested, the cartoon showed it hanging on the gallows alongside the bag of feathers. Colonial Williamsburg has modeled its depiction of a Liberty Pole bearing a barrel and feathers on this cartoon even though the London artist didn’t draw that scene from life and shaped his imagery to make a political point.

**5. Myth: Tarring and feathering ended with the Revolution.**

American culture came to associate tar and feathers with the Revolutionary period, but crowds revived it during other conflicts.

In pre-Civil War America, mobs tarred and feathered several people who spoke against slavery and threatened prominent abolitionists with the same treatment.

Other crowds used tar and feathers on leaders of religious minorities: the Mormon leader Joseph Smith in 1832 and the Catholic priest John Bapst in 1851.

When the U.S. entered the First World War, crowds attacked some citizens who refused to cooperate with the war effort. Those riots spilled over into assaults on labor organizers, especially the anti-war Industrial Workers of the World, and on civil-rights activists.

More recent examples of tarring and feathering are rare and no longer seem to involve stripping off the victim’s clothing.

In 1971 a branch of the K.K.K. tarred a Michigan school principal for advocating a celebration of the late Rev. Martin Luther King.

In Northern Ireland in 2007, two men thought to be in the I.R.A. carried out the ritual assault on a man they accused of dealing drugs.

Tarring and feathering remains a powerful way to intimidate and humiliate perceived enemies outside the law.